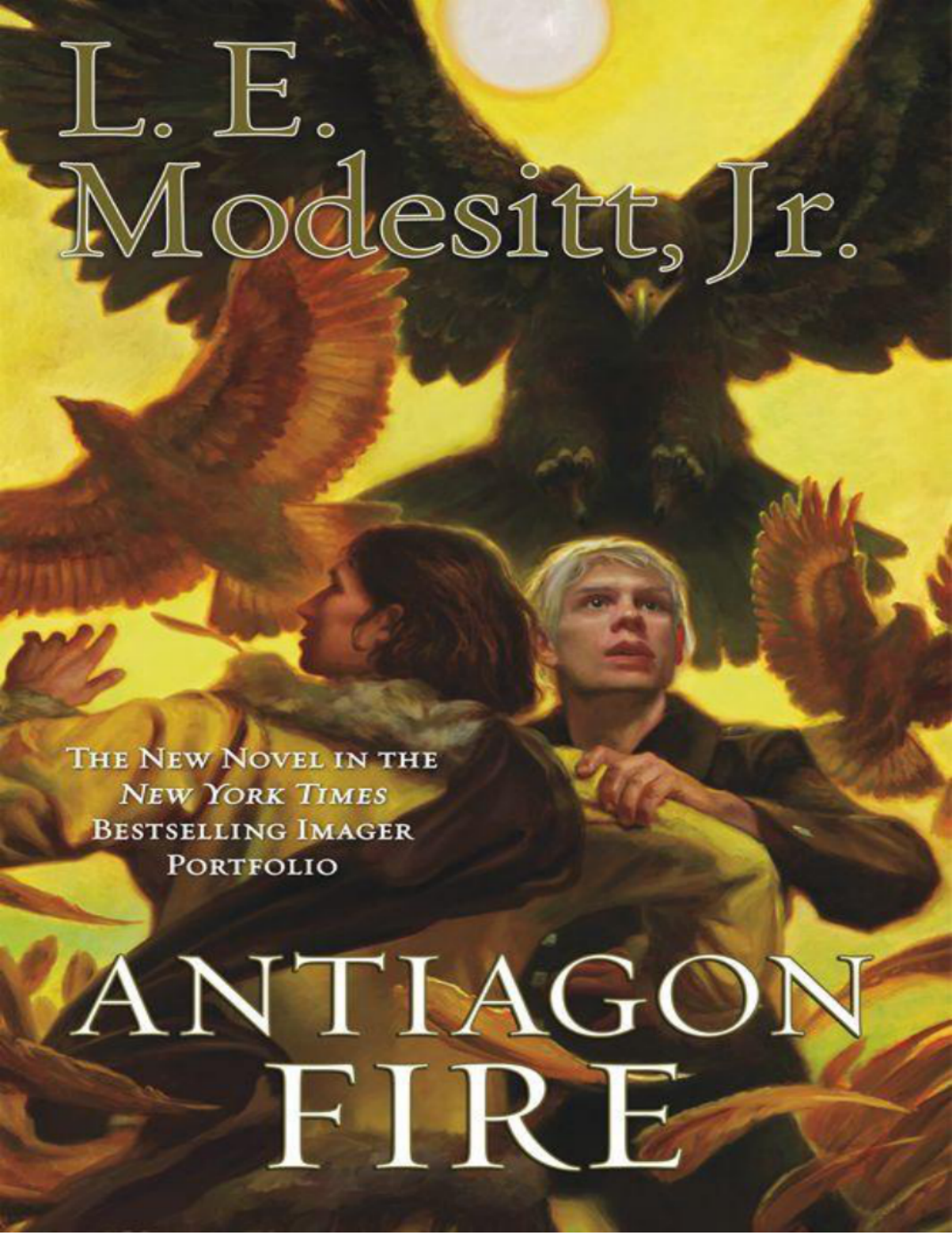
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THE NEW NOVEL IN THE
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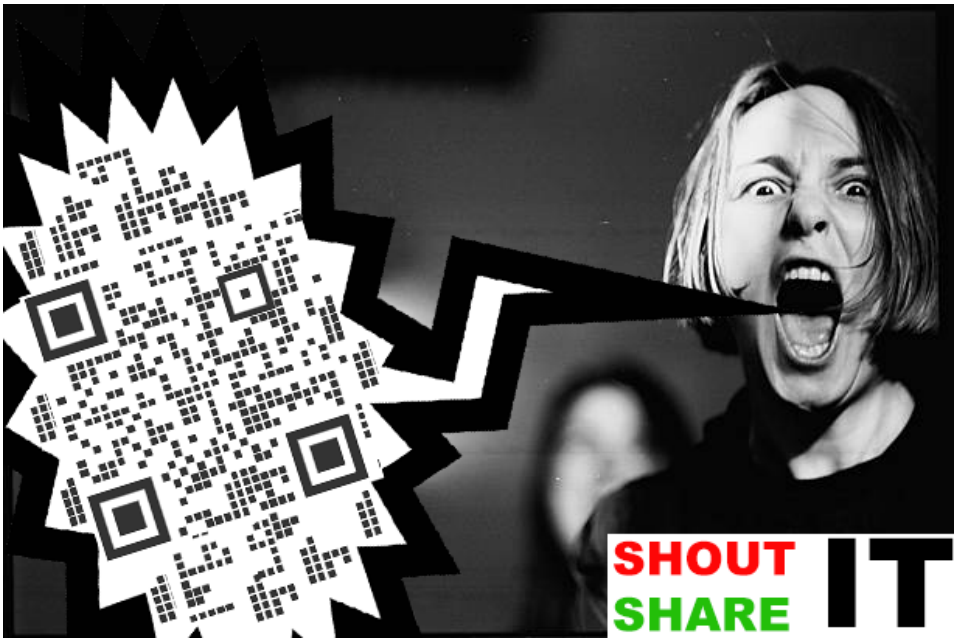
BESTSELLING IMAGER
PORTFOLIO
ANTIAGON FIRE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L. E. Modesitt Jr

Antiagon Fire

1

Quaeryt shivered. He opened his eyes to find himself looking up into a white sky, a sky from which flakes like icy needles jabbed at his exposed face. The low moaning of a deep winter wind filled his ears. Yet, for all that the icy needles fell upon his face, each one freezing, then burning, before penetrating his skin with a thread of chill that combined into a web that bled all warmth from his body … there was no wind.

Standing around and above him, in a circle like pillars, looming out of the icy mist drifting down over him, were troopers in the blue-gray uniforms of Bovaria. Each Bovarian was coated in ice, and each stared down at him, as if to demand a reason why they stood there, frozen and immobile … why he still lived and breathed.

Breathe?

Quaeryt tried, but his body was so chill, with the ice creeping up from the pure white fingernails of his immobile hands and from his equally white and unmoving toenails, that his chest did not move. Nor could he utter even a sound, his words as frozen as his body.

As he froze in the whiteness, the complete and utter stillness behind which moaned the winter wind of devastation, the dead troopers reproached him with their unmoving eyes and their silence …

2

Quaeryt stretched, then rose from the table in the breakfast room in the summer chateau of the late High Holder Paitrak. Bhayar had eaten and departed before Quaeryt and Vaelora had come down from their tower chamber.

"You don't have to rush," Vaelora said quietly, in the high Bovarian she and Quaeryt always used when alone. "You should have more tea. You had another dream last night, didn't you?"

He nodded. "They're not quite as often." After a moment he added, "But I do need to get ready."

"You're not meeting with Bhayar until eighth glass."

"I worry about it."

"What can he do? You handed him a great victory, and he's now ruler of both Telaryn and Bovaria."

Quaeryt raised his eyebrows. They'd talked about that the night before.

"All right. Ruler of the eastern half of Bovaria … and maybe the west and north," his wife conceded. "He can't exactly punish you for success."

"No … but he can keep me as a subcommander and send me off to subdue the north, the northwest, the south, or the southwest."

"The High Holders of the south already pledged allegiance," she reminded him.

"Just those in the southeast."

"Has he heard anything from the lands of Khel?"

"He hadn't yesterday evening, and if the new Pharsi High Council there rejects his proposal…" Quaeryt shrugged.

"They'd be fools to do so." Vaelora sighed, shaking her head slightly so that the wavy curls in her light brown hair seemed to ripple. "No, dearest, you don't have to tell me how many fools there are in this world." She smiled.

As he looked into her brown eyes, he couldn't help but smile back at the woman who had raced across half of Lydar to bring him back from the near-dead. After a moment he replied, "I fear that he may send me as an envoy."

"To prove to the Khellans that you are everything that Major Calkoran was sent to tell them you are?"

"Something like that." Quaeryt walked to the window, where he reached out to pull back the curtains, then stopped for a moment to reposition his hand slightly. The two fingers on Quaeryt's left hand still didn't work, more than two weeks after Vaelora had finally roused him from a semicoma. While they didn't hurt, and he could

move them with his other hand, neither finger would respond to his desire to move. At least, with his thumb and the other fingers, he could hold and lift things. *Or draw curtains.* He was still disconcerted when he saw his fingernails-snow-white, just like every strand of hair on his body.

He eased back the curtains and looked out to the west. Most of the snow and ice his imaging had created to end the battle of Variana had melted, but the land was brown and sere, and the extreme chill had destroyed or rendered unusable many of the buildings on the west side of the River Aluse, excepting, of course, the Chateau Regis, whose walls were now alabaster white and nearly indestructible, not that anyone within had survived.

"You think the Pharsi will balk?" asked Vaelora gently.

"You know they will. That's not the question." Quaeryt released the curtains and turned, catching sight of himself in a small mirror on the wall. His brown-tinted green uniform-the only one of that shade in all of the Telaryn forces, reflecting his background as a scholar-looked trim enough, although he knew it was looser than it had been, if somewhat darker than he recalled. "What happens after that is what matters."

"That's why he'll send you and no one else. Khel is two-thirds the size of old Bovaria. He doesn't want to reconquer what Kharst already bled Bovaria dry to gain."

"If he wants them to agree to his rule, he'll have to allow their High Council to act as would a provincial governor. Perhaps he might appoint the head councilor as provincial governor."

"I'm sure you can persuade him of that, dearest."

That meant, Quaeryt knew, that Vaelora was telling him he needed to. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome."

A slight cough at the archway to the breakfast room reminded Quaeryt of the serving girl. He turned. "Yes?"

"Would there be anything else, sir and Lady?" asked the serving girl in the rougher accent of low Bovarian. Even after almost two weeks, the girl would not look directly at either of them.

That was hardly surprising, Quaeryt reflected, and something that he'd likely encounter for some time to come. *But that too will pass. Everything passes in time.*

"Another pot of tea, if you would," said Vaelora, in high Bovarian.

"Nothing more for me," replied Quaeryt, also in high Bovarian.

Once the girl had provided more tea and retreated to the serving pantry, and Quaeryt had reseated himself across the table from his wife, he continued. "How would you suggest that I approach the

matter? He is your brother."

"Just tell him."

Quaeryt laughed softly. "That's easier said than done."

"You haven't had problems in the past."

"That was before we wed."

"I'm certain you've done so since then, dearest."

Quaeryt shook his head. "Perhaps it's not about that at all."

"He has no other choice. Why are you so worried about it? You'll do what's necessary, and he'll accept the inevitable."

"I … don't want to leave you. Not after … everything."

"I don't want you to leave…" Vaelora looked down.

"But?"

"We both have to do what must be done. And if Bhayar has to settle Khel by force, it will be so much the worse."

"He still might have something else in mind."

"How likely is that, dearest?"

"With Bhayar, it's always possible."

Vaelora raised her eyebrows.

Quaeryt decided against further speculation as to what Bhayar would do, and asked, "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better … after the first three months, my stomach settled." She made a wry face. "Now it is merely growing. What will you do after you meet with Bhayar?"

"Return and tell you, then, if necessary, gather officers and imagers and tell them…"

They continued to talk until Quaeryt rose to make his way to meet with Bhayar.

At half a quint before eighth glass, Quaeryt arrived in the second-floor corridor outside the study Bhayar had appropriated until the repairs and the refurbishing of the Chateau Regis were completed.

The captain stationed there inclined his head, more than perfunctorily, "Subcommander, sir."

"Just wait until the bells strike the glass."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt did note that as soon as the first chime echoed down the wide hallway, the captain turned, walked to the study door, and rapped upon it. "Subcommander Quaeryt, sir." Before Bhayar finished speaking, the captain opened the dark oak door and motioned for Quaeryt to enter.

The study of the late High Holder Paitrak was located on the north side of the chateau, designed to be cool in the summer. Overlooking a walled garden, now brown, with snow and ice in the shaded corners, the north outside wall held narrow floor-to-ceiling windows, each separated from the next by dark wooden bookshelves

exactly the same width as the windows. The shelves also ran from floor to ceiling and, with the inside shutters open, the small leaded panes radiated a coolness not entirely dispelled by the fire in the hearth set into the east wall.

The wiry Bhayar rose from behind the wide table desk positioned before the bookshelves comprising the west wall. His shortish brown hair was disarrayed, as it often was, but his dark blue eyes were intent. "You're looking well this morning, almost back to your old self." His Bovarian was impeccable and far more precise, Quaeryt had discovered, than the language used by most of the chateau functionaries, unsurprisingly, since Bovarian had been the court language at Solis.

"I'm feeling well." Quaeryt smiled.

Bhayar gestured to the chairs before the desk, then reseated himself.

Quaeryt took the leftmost chair and waited for the Lord of Telaryn and Bovaria to speak.

"Matters have been going well," Bhayar said. "The shops and factorages in Variana are all open. The High Holders in the east and south, except for those in the southwest and those within two hundred milles to the north and west, have pledged allegiance. Most have remitted token tariffs."

"Token?"

"Bovarian tariffs are due in the first week of Feuillyt. Most claim, and have receipts to prove it, that they had already paid. We did recover over thirty thousand golds from the strongrooms in Chateau Regis. I insisted on a token of a hundred golds from each High Holder."

Quaeryt nodded. "What about the lands farther north and northwest?"

"Messengers have barely had a chance to reach that far." Bhayar shrugged. "There's also the far southwest. The clerks who survived claim that there are High Holders along the border with Antiago who haven't paid tariffs in years. We can't tell. Your winter freeze turned those records to mush."

Quaeryt doubted that the cold had, but most likely the thawing had rendered poorly entered ledger entries illegible. "It's sounding like Kharst didn't actually rule all of his own lands."

"He may not have. I'm not Kharst."

"Is there anything else?" *As if that weren't already more than I wanted to learn.*

"I'm pleased about the way your imagers have finished rebuilding and restructuring the interior of the Chateau Regis…"

"They did well. I rode there on Lundi. Or is there something else

you would like done?"

"No … The furnishings will come as they will … but that's not why I wanted to meet with you." Bhayar's dark blue eyes fixed on Quaeryt, but he said nothing more.

Because he disliked Bhayar's gambit of using silence to force another to speak, Quaeryt nodded once more and smiled politely.

"There is the problem with Khel…"

"I can imagine. Have you heard from Major Calkoran?" The former Khellan officer had been dispatched-while Quaeryt had still been unable to hear or communicate-with the other Khellan companies to present Bhayar's suggestion that the resurgent Pharsi High Council agree to Bhayar's rule, under far more lenient terms than those imposed by the late Rex Kharst.

"I made him a subcommander and constituted all the Khellan companies as a battalion. He sent one dispatch from near Kherseilles. He was heading to Khelgror to meet with the new High Council."

"What happened to the provincial governor?"

"We can't even find any records about one. Maybe they didn't have one. Whatever happened, I doubt it was pleasant for Kharst's functionaries. Before Calkoran left, I revoked all the holdings of Bovarian High Holders in Khel. There weren't many." Bhayar frowned. "I haven't granted any of those lands to new High Holders."

"It might be wise not to," suggested Quaeryt. "Not yet, anyway."

"I'll need to create some new High Holders…"

"I'm sure you will. I suspect you can find enough existing high holds in the former lands of old Bovaria whose holders died or who would not fit your standards to meet that need. I even ran across a few I'd be happy to recommend."

"I've read your reports. There may not be enough."

"There will doubtless be more before the consolidation is over, but you'll only buy the same troubles you had in Tilbor-except worse-if you try creating high holdings in Khel. Besides, you need fewer High Holders, not more."

"I'm aware of your feelings about that, Quaeryt. I'm not about to do anything in Khel until the situation is clear. Calkoran won't be able to resolve the situation. I knew that before I dispatched him."

"So that's why you're going to send me?"

"I don't believe I've mentioned that to you-or anyone else. You're wrong. I'm not sending you." Bhayar smiled, the expression one of pleasure, with a hint of mischief. "I'm making you and Vaelora my envoys."

"Vaelora?" asked Quaeryt. "She is with child, you know?" He didn't keep a slight acidity from his voice.

"She rode from Solis here without stopping more than a few

glasses at any one time," said Bhayar coolly, "and that didn't hurt her. She's not due until late spring or early summer. I've had Subcommander Khaern look into the fastest means of transport. You and Vaelora, as I was about to tell you, can take Kharst's personal canal boat along the Great Canal from Variana to Laaryn and then down the river. I've already arranged for the *Montagne* to meet you at Ephra and take you to Kherseilles. From there, you can take a flatboat up the Groral River to Khelgror. You'll have two regiments and what's left of your Fifth Battalion as an escort. And your imagers."

"The *Montagne* is a large vessel, but she's scarcely large enough to carry two regiments and first company," Quaeryt pointed out, "let alone mounts for the men."

"I also sent the *Solis* and made arrangements to charter ten other merchanters. You'll have to leave most of the mounts behind, but the traders in Kherseilles should have enough mounts for you there."

Quaeryt had his doubts about fitting two regiments and a company on even twelve ships, and whether all twelve would even arrive at Ephra. "How do I know we'll have enough mounts at Kherseilles?"

"I've done what I can. You'll have to do whatever's necessary when you get there." Bhayar smiled again. "There aren't any Pharsi troopers left, except the ones you commanded, and they won't attack you. I can't believe that any remaining Bovarian units in Khel, if there even are any, are large enough to give you, of all my commanders, any difficulty."

"All your commanders?"

"You've been promoted to commander." Bhayar gestured to a felt pouch on the desk. "All your insignia are there. I'd appreciate it if you'd put them on before you leave the study."

"I'll make sure I do, sir." Quaeryt had to admit that none of the Telaryn senior officers who'd covertly opposed him would be able to say a thing, not publicly, after his imaging had destroyed almost all the Bovarian defenders, as well as the late Rex Kharst, his court and family, and all the senior Bovarian officers … as well as more than a score of High Holders close to Kharst. Equally important, the senior Telaryn officers, especially Marshal Deucalon and Submarshal Myskyl, would be pleased to have Quaeryt out of the way. Quaeryt had no doubts that they would be planning to reduce his influence by the time he and Vaelora returned.

"Might I know the regiment besides that of Subcommander Khaern?"

"The Nineteenth Regiment from Northern Army, now headed by Subcommander Alazyn."

"Recently promoted from major?"

"Exactly." Bhayar laughed. "Oh … and on the way to Ephra, you'll also be accompanied by Commander Skarpa and the Southern Army. Marshal Deucalon suggested that to keep Aliaro from getting adventurous … and to make certain that the southwesternmost High Holders pledge allegiance. Skarpa will also have to deal with the elveweed problem."

Quaeryt raised his eyebrows. "I didn't know Bovaria had an elveweed problem." He also didn't like the fact that Deucalon had suggested Skarpa's new assignment. *Then again, it might have been Myskyl.*

"Everyone has an elveweed problem. As I recall, there were some factors in Extela…"

Quaeryt nodded. He didn't like being reminded of some of the difficulties he'd encountered in his brief tenure as provincial governor of Montagne. "What is the particular problem in Ephra? Smuggling?"

"You might recall that Aliaro tried to blockade the port during Kharst's campaign in Khel … and that Kharst burned part of Kephria. I'm certain Aliaro hasn't forgotten that."

"But Aliaro sent troopers against us on the campaign up the Aluse," Quaeryt pointed out.

"That was then. Rulers have to be flexible." Bhayar smiled sardonically. "Then there's the problem that several High Holders have the equivalent of battalions of private guards funded by their … investments in elveweed and other even more undesirable substances."

"With all that, I hope you gave Skarpa another four or five regiments and made him a submarshal," said Quaeryt.

Bhayar laughed. "Once more, I see the wisdom of not keeping you too close at hand."

The silence drew out, but Quaeryt refused to speak.

Finally, Bhayar said, "I already assigned two more regiments."

"That won't be enough, for many reasons. First, Subcommander Khaern and his regiment will be with me. Second, Aliaro will look at how many regiments Skarpa has. Third, you don't need all of the Northern Army here in Variana. Fourth, you'll have to strain to keep feeding the extra regiments…" Quaeryt paused, then asked, "Do you want to hear more?"

"No. From what you're saying, I should give him four regiments more."

"You should. Or five. And the promotion."

"I will. I've learned that it's not wise to disregard your suggestions, even if I don't like them. But give me some reasons."

Quaeryt refrained from smiling at Bhayar's barely hidden exasperation. "First, the title will help convince Aliaro to behave, or at

least to think before he tries some form of provocation. Second, it will give the local High Holders pause. Third, it will allow Skarpa the time, the men, and the position to plan for the eventual. Fourth, it will give both Deucalon and Myskyl pause. Fifth, you should also send Myskyl up the River Aluse from Variana to assure the full capitulation of the High Holders in the areas of Rivages, Asseroiles, Tacqueville, and perhaps all the way to the Montaignes D'Glace. By doing that-"

"I do understand that part," said Bhayar testily.

"It also emphasizes that you're relying on Skarpa as heavily as Myskyl-"

"And that will require Deucalon, whom you trust not at all, to be more careful in what he does."

Quaeryt nodded.

"I'll promote Skarpa, but don't you say a word. Arranging the other regimental transfers will take a bit more time. Still … you and Vaelora should be able to leave on Lundi." Bhayar put his hands on the wooden arms of the desk chair, as if about to rise.

"You also need to let Skarpa pick his successor as commander of Third Regiment."

"Of course. What else?" Bhayar's voice turned quietly sardonic.

"You're getting what you want," Quaeryt said quietly. "I'd like something."

"Oh? You're now a commander."

Quaeryt ignored the reference to the promotion. He'd more than earned it. "You remember that you agreed to my building the imagers into a group that will support you and your heirs, and even Clayar's heirs?"

"How could I forget?"

"They need to be gathered in a place that is both separate and isolated, yet close enough to remind everyone, quietly, that they are at your beck and call. The battle resulted in much devastation, especially along the river. The so-called isle of piers would be an excellent location for such a place. Also, by turning it into a beautiful isle scholarium for imagers, it would help reinforce both your power and your grace in rebuilding a more beautiful Variana … Although, in a year or so, when you officially relocate your capital here, I would recommend changing the city's name-"

"Do your presumptions never end?" Bhayar's tone was half amused, half exasperated, and followed by a sigh.

"Have I advised or done anything that was not proved to be in your interests, sir?" Quaeryt decided against reminding Bhayar that they had already discussed what he'd just said.

Bhayar shook his head, not even trying to conceal his exasperation. "I will be glad when you are off furthering my interests

out of earshot."

"That is another reason why you might consider allowing the isle of piers to the imagers…"

"Enough!" Bhayar shook his head vigorously, but the sigh that followed was the long and dramatic one, not the short explosive one that indicated real anger. "I will hold the isle for a future reserve, for now, until you return from the so-called High Council of Khel with an agreement accepting my sovereignty."

"You won't get that unless you allow the head of their High Council to act as the provincial governor of Khel."

"I can't do that!"

"How about as princeps? That would allow your rule to be paramount, but allow the Pharsi some latitude in maintaining their way of life."

Bhayar's frown was thoughtful.

Quaeryt once more waited.

"Are you sure you didn't know you were Pharsi until last year?"

"Absolutely." Quaeryt paused. "You could use that arrangement as leverage to keep the provincial governors of Telaryn in line…"

"They'll have to grant more than that. At least twenty High Holdings along the coast, and two or three near Khelgror."

"I *might* persuade them to the coast holdings. I doubt that they'd agree to a high holding near Khelgror unless you made at least one of them a Pharsi holder."

"Do what you can, but I can't let it be seen that the Pharsi are dictating terms."

"In other words, you need to claim you've obtained the spoils of high holdings…"

"You don't have to put it that way, Quaeryt."

"I just wish matters to be clear between us. I've never spoken for you except exactly what you have stated."

"Or what you've gotten me to agree to state."

Quaeryt grinned. "You've never agreed to anything you wouldn't have granted, and you know it."

Although Bhayar grinned, if briefly, in return, Quaeryt knew he'd be in the study for at least another glass, going over details … and then the minutiae of those details.

3

As Quaeryt had suspected, his meeting with Bhayar was not short, and he did not return to the quarters he and Vaelora shared until almost three quints past ninth glass. She was waiting for him in the small sitting room adjoining their bedchamber and immediately rose from where she had been seated, setting a small leatherbound volume on the table beside her chair.

"Reading *Rholan and the Nameless* again?" he asked.

She offered a mock scowl. "Are you going to tell me how things went with Bhayar? Besides getting promoted?" An impish smile appeared as her eyes took in the gold crescent moon insignia on Quaeryt's collar.

"Did you know?"

She shook her head. "You know I've scarcely talked to him since you recovered. I did think he'd have to, but having to do something means he'll usually take his time in getting around to it. What did he say about your going to Khel?"

"About what we suspected," replied Quaeryt dryly. "Except for one thing. You're coming with me to Khelgror. We're both being named as envoys."

"I thought that might be the case."

"Oh … you did?"

"Think about to whom you'll be talking, dearest … and who often makes the decisions. Especially after what happened to most of the men."

Quaeryt nodded. He should have thought about that. Women were equal, if not more than equal, in Pharsi culture. Since much of Khel had been Pharsi-at least before the ravages of the Red Death and the bloodbath created by the late Rex Kharst's conquest of Khel-women would definitely be involved in deciding on Bhayar's offer. Sending not only a high-ranking Pharsi officer such as Quaeryt, but his wife, who was Bhayar's sister and known to be of Pharsi blood, only made sense. *If you succeed … only if you succeed.* "It's not likely to be as easy as Bhayar thinks."

"I doubt he thinks it's easy."

"And … if we don't get their agreement…"

"You'll end up as princeps in Tilbor again or in the far north of Bovaria when all the fighting's over," suggested Vaelora. "Or, even worse, as military governor of Khel."

"That's assuming I survive the assignments that Myskyl and Deucalon will suggest Bhayar give me."

"We'd best succeed." Vaelora's voice was firm.

She didn't have to mention that Quaeryt had barely survived either the battle of Ferravyl or the battle of Variana.

"We'll have two regiments, plus first company, after we leave Ephra." He kept a bland expression on his face.

"We're supposed to travel unescorted across Bovaria?" asked Vaelora a trace sharply.

"No … two regiments and first company will accompany us all the way. Commander Skarpa and Southern Army will also go as far as Ephra." He shook his head. "After that, Bhayar's arranged for ships to take us to Kherseilles. I have my doubts about whether they'll all show up, since ten are merchanters." *More than doubts, knowing what you know about merchanters. Then again, he had to have made arrangements weeks ago, even before you'd recovered, but …* He looked at Vaelora. "Did you tell him I'd recover?"

"Of course. I knew you would. I told you that, dearest. What about the ships?"

"His two warships will be there, but the merchanters…" Quaeryt shrugged. "If they all don't make it, Skarpa could use extra battalions and regiments. Then there's the problem with mounts. The ships can't carry them. Bhayar claims he's made arrangements for us to have mounts in Kherseilles, but he wouldn't tell me the details … and that's not good."

Vaelora shook her head. "No … and he probably said he had every confidence in you. But don't you think we could travel with fewer troopers, even if you don't want to tell Bhayar?"

"We could. I don't like it. Do you think I should?"

"No." She smiled. "You should have the choice of what to do if it comes to that."

"I still worry."

"You've never had enough troops, or mounts, dearest. Neither has Skarpa. This time, you might. Don't give them away because something *might* happen."

It most likely will happen, but she's right. In the momentary silence that filled the sitting room, Quaeryt said, "I need to find Skarpa and talk to him."

"You didn't tell me when we are leaving."

"Lundi."

"Lundi? That only gives me four days to get ready." Her eyes narrowed. "Am I supposed to ride the entire way?"

"No. We're to use Rex Kharst's personal canal boat as far as Ephra. We'll take the Great Canal from Variana to Laaryn…" Quaeryt quickly explained the arrangements.

"The Great Canal," mused Vaelora when he had finished. "Wasn't that where so many died in building it?"

“Kharst’s father started building it. Kharst finished it. They used prisoners, captives, and some even say imagers. It took almost thirty years to finish, and at least one scholar wrote that thousands were buried under its walls.”

Vaelora shivered slightly. “For a canal?”

“Because Bhayar and his father denied Bovarian traders free passage on the Aluse,” Quaeryt pointed out.

“So they sacrificed thousands to avoid paying passage tariffs?”

“Some rulers find lives cheaper than golds,” Quaeryt said dryly.

Vaelora shook her head, then added, “We’ll still end up riding into Khelgror, I’d wager.”

“But you won’t be riding the whole way.”

“Go find Skarpa. I need to make arrangements for more suitable clothing.”

Quaeryt frowned.

“Dearest, even if all goes well, it will be winter, or close to it, before we return to Variana, and by then I will not be able to wear what I now possess.”

“I understand,” he said quickly. “I’ll try to finish…”

“Take your time. And keep working on getting your shield strength back.”

Quaeryt nodded. Actually, from what he could tell, his shields were stronger than ever, confirming his feeling that the more he attempted with imaging, the stronger an imager he became. *Except all the times that happened, you almost died. How long will it be before you push too hard and don’t survive?* He couldn’t help but think about poor Shaelyt … who’d tried to do too much … and hadn’t survived.

“And even if you think your shields are back, keep them up, especially when you think it should be safe.”

Quaeryt smiled sheepishly, then walked over and embraced his wife, holding her closely before kissing her cheek, and retreating to seek out Skarpa.

He’d hoped to find both Major Zhelan and Skarpa in the estate’s guesthouse-temporarily being used as headquarters by Marshal Deucalon, but Zhelan was out, riding a patrol with first company, the only unit effectively left of what had been Quaeryt’s Fifth Battalion, now that the Khellan companies had been dispatched with Subcommander Calkoran.

Quaeryt finally located Skarpa, sharing a small chamber with another commander at the rear of the guesthouse, a space far closer to the courtyard and stables than that of any other senior officer. The other commander was absent, but likely not for long, given the papers stacked on the second desk.

Skarpa rose. Then he saw the insignia on Quaeryt’s collar and

nodded. “About time, Commander.”

“Quaeryt. You’ve been a commander longer. You still outrank me.”

“Not for all that long, I’d wager.” The hint of a smile lurked behind Skarpa’s pleasant expression.

“You’ve said that before. It didn’t happen. Bhayar promoted me because he had to for me to command more than one regiment.” He paused. “He has told you about escorting us…?”

“He hasn’t. Myskyl did, this morning.” Skarpa offered a wry smile. “Then, less than a quint ago, Deucalon appeared at my door here, and told me that I’d be promoted to submarshal tomorrow by Lord Bhayar and that I’ll be leading a full seven regiments to Ephra-in addition to your forces. How much of that was your doing? Don’t tell me it wasn’t.”

“It was Bhayar’s decision. I did suggest that two or three regiments weren’t enough for what he wanted, and that it would put less strain on the quartermasters if you took more men south. I also told him to let you pick your successor as commander of Third Regiment.”

“I appreciate that.”

Quaeryt raised his eyebrows.

“Fhaen. Falossn would do as well, but Fhaen has more experience. That’s not all you said, knowing you.”

“I did suggest that he dispatch Myskyl to the north and northwest to assure that the High Holders there, and any remaining Bovarian forces, pledge their allegiance to Bhayar.”

“Like I said, in time you’ll outrank me.”

Quaeryt shook his head. “I’ll never be a submarshal or marshal, and I shouldn’t be.”

“I have my doubts, but I won’t argue. I’ve learned that I’m usually wrong where you’re involved.”

“That’s because I don’t argue when you’re right,” said Quaeryt with a laugh.

“And I argue when I’m wrong?” jested Skarpa.

“No. But sometimes you don’t appreciate your own abilities enough.” After the briefest hesitation, Quaeryt asked, “How many of your new regiments will be foot?”

“Two.”

“Good. You’ll need more foot in the south.”

“That’s why I asked for them.”

“I’m glad we aren’t arguing about that,” quipped Quaeryt.

“There is one problem with the regiments, though,” said Skarpa, “or their commanders. One of them is Fourteenth Regiment. Commander Kharllon.”

"I don't know him, but I'd wager he's close to Deucalon or Myskyl. Are there any other commanders or subcommanders in the regiments he assigned to you who outrank Meinyt?"

"No. Paedn, Dulaek, Meurn, and Fhaasn are all subcommanders. One is enough, especially when Kharllon is close to Myskyl."

"Have you talked to Meinyt?"

Skarpa nodded. "He expected it. So did I, but I don't like it. Kharllon outranks you, too, but he'd likely not press that. He understands power well." Skarpa shook his head. "Calkoran won't get the Pharsi to agree to Bhayar's terms, you know?"

"I'd be surprised." Quaeryt laughed sardonically. "I'd be surprised if Vaelora and I can."

"He's sending you both?"

"Women have a stronger position in Khel … or they did before Kharst conquered them."

"I'd still be surprised if you can't get them to agree."

"Why do you say that?"

"Khel wasn't strong enough to stand that long against Kharst, Red Death or no Red Death. It certainly can't stand for long against a united Telaryn and Bovaria. Now is the time when the Pharsi have the greatest leverage, and you're the perfect one to point that out."

"People seldom decide such things rationally. We both know that."

"Then you need to give them a reason to decide irrationally. I'm sure you can manage that. You've done it before."

"Only with a few individuals. The rest of the time I've been far more effective at destroying things and people."

"That's true, but it doesn't mean you can't change how you operate."

Quaeryt nodded. *It does point out again that it is time to try other approaches.* "What do you know about Subcommander Alazyn and Nineteenth Regiment?"

"Alazyn … Alazyn…" Skarpa's face brightened. "He was the one who took over after Commander Kantyr got killed by that girl who claimed she was his mistress."

That figures. "What about Alazyn?"

"He's another one like Zhelan. Tough, fair, knows fighting men and discipline. Not much for tactics. But he's not from Nineteenth. He was the senior regimental major under Pulaskyr. Is the Nineteenth the other regiment you got? I heard about Khaern."

"It is."

"Alazyn will do fine under you. He'll have his hands full for a while with Nineteenth, not so much, though, as if they'd stayed in the Northern Army under Deucalon." Skarpa went on. "You might wish to

pay a call on Submarshal Myskyl. Marshal Deucalon is touring the lands east of Variana, paying visits to the estates of quite a few High Holders."

"Mostly deceased, I presume."

"I have not heard." Skarpa offered a crooked smile.

"I will see Myskyl, then. By then, perhaps Zhelan will have returned."

"He said something about returning by the first glass of the afternoon. Please don't give Myskyl my best."

"I wouldn't dream of it, even in a nightmare. Until later." Quaeryt nodded and made his way from the small chamber toward the front of the guesthouse, where he soon located the study occupied by the submarshal.

The hard-faced undercaptain-likely a recently promoted senior squad leader-looked up, then immediately stood. "Commander, sir?"

"Would you inquire to see if the submarshal might have a moment?"

"Certainly, sir." The undercaptain moved to the door, knocked, and stepped inside, only to return almost immediately, gesturing for Quaeryt to enter the small study.

Once inside the chamber, most likely a lady's study, from the graceful carved bookcase of only three shelves to the writing table with the curved legs, Quaeryt inclined his head to the gray-haired submarshal, noting that the scars on Myskyl's left cheek, old and faded as they were, seemed more prominent for some reason … or perhaps Quaeryt had forgotten them, since he'd seen so little of Myskyl in the past half year. "Good morning, sir."

"Good morning, Commander." Myskyl studied Quaeryt, then smiled. "I understand that you'll be off to the west to make certain that the lands of Khel remain loyal."

"I will indeed be heading west with several regiments to persuade the High Council of Khel to accept Lord Bhayar's offer of governance. Since he did not conquer them, they doubtless believe that they owe him no innate loyalty. My task, as I am certain you know, is to make certain that they understand that accepting his kind offer and pledging their loyalty is by far the best and most prudent course of action." Quaeryt smiled. "My loyalty to Lord Bhayar goes back to when we were both students, long before Lady Vaelora and I were wed, and that bond has only reinforced my desire to dedicate myself to acting with prudence in his best interests."

Myskyl's eyes hardened, if but for a moment, before he smiled heartily. "I'm more than certain that Lord Bhayar appreciates your unrestrained loyalty more than he will ever be able to repay, and that you will employ all your considerable talents to the end of assuring

that Khel will remain loyal to him."

"I will certainly do my best to create such a loyalty, although I doubt that the Khellan acquiescence to Rex Kharst was based upon loyalty in any form. Still … we all do what we must, as I know you have always done, first in service to Marshal Rescalyn and now in service to Marshal Deucalon and Lord Bhayar. I have watched the care with which you have planned every strategy and can only admire your skill." Quaeryt smiled slightly more than politely.

"Alas, Commander, your skill in such is second to none, and you have mastered the art of applying force when and where it will do the most good. Of course, not all … difficulties … can be so resolved."

"I defer to your expertise and experience in that, Submarshal, and I will keep that well in mind as I deal with the Khellan High Council. Might you have any specific advice as to those points I should keep most in mind?"

"Only that agreements that cannot be enforced, in some fashion or another, will be broken as soon as it is in the interest of the parties to do so."

Quaeryt nodded. "I fear that may be a concern for those on both sides, and I will follow your observation as matters develop." He inclined his head just slightly. "I would not wish to take any more of your time, but I did want to pay my respects in case I did not have the opportunity before we depart."

"You are most thoughtful in that respect," replied Myskyl, "indeed in all respects. As you demonstrated in the last days of the hill holders' revolt."

"That thoughtfulness I learned from observing you and Marshal Rescalyn, and I do appreciate having the opportunity to learn from you both." After another nod, Quaeryt smiled politely once more, then turned and left.

From Deucalon's duty officer, Quaeryt learned that Khaern had ridden out earlier on "a routine scouting mission."

After another quint or so had passed, Quaeryt saw Zhelan ride into the side courtyard, but it was yet another quint before the hard-faced major with the slightly graying black hair left the stable and crossed to the guest house's rear entrance where Quaeryt waited.

"Sir?" Then Zhelan glanced at Quaeryt's collar. "Congratulations, sir."

"Thank you." Quaeryt paused. "Has anyone told you of our next task?"

"Our next task?" The major's eyebrows lifted, and a mild expression of puzzlement crossed his face.

"Lord Bhayar has assigned Eleventh and Nineteenth Regiments-and what remains of Fifth Battalion-to me for a mission to Khelgror."

"You're to … conquer the Pharsi again with two regiments?"

"No … Lady Vaelora and I are being sent as envoys." Quaeryt went on to explain.

Once Quaeryt had finished, Zhelan was silent for several moments.

"Go on. You can speak," said Quaeryt cheerfully.

"Lord Bhayar doesn't want much of you, does he?"

"He'd prefer not to resort to arms. So would we. So, I suspect, would the Pharsi High Council."

"But leaving on Lundi?"

"We can't afford to wait."

"I can see that. Are you…?"

"I'm well. And it will be two weeks or longer before we encounter even the chance of serious opposition … if we do at all. The Pharsi aren't likely to attack any envoy now."

"I can see that, sir."

"Think about it. I just wanted to make sure you knew as soon as I did." Quaeryt added, "I'll need a squad to accompany me to meet with Subcommander Alazyn … as soon as you can provide one."

"Fifth squad is the duty squad. They can be ready to ride in less than a quint."

Not quite a quint passed before Quaeryt mounted the mare that had seen him through so much and, accompanied by fifth squad, rode out on the hazy gray day. In deference to Vaelora, rather than carrying light shields that, if anything impacted them, would trigger heavier shields, Quaeryt held full imaging shields.

They traveled more than a mille south, and another two west along a muddy rutted road to reach the smaller holding where Alazyn and Nineteenth Regiment were quartered. The hold house was old, of reddish bricks that needed repointing, and the hedges that flanked the narrow drive to the small uncovered portico had been but raggedly trimmed.

A short stocky officer with the silver crescents of a subcommander on his collar had hurried out into the cool fall wind to stand waiting on the uneven stone platform that served as a receiving portico. As Quaeryt put his second boot on the stone, a violent gust of wind whipped around him, and he had to grab his visor cap to keep it from blowing off his head.

"It's been right windy, Commander," offered the subcommander. "How might I help you?"

"Would you be Subcommander Alazyn, by chance?"

"The very same, sir."

"It's good to meet you. I'm Commander Quaeryt."

Alazyn opened his mouth, then closed it, finally saying, "Sir … I

should have known … I didn't expect you to ride out here…"

Quaeryt grinned. "Why not? It makes more sense than sending a courier."

Alazyn gestured toward the door. "Please do come in."

Quaeryt followed the shorter officer in through the wide single and weathered ironbound oak door, closing it behind himself.

"Commander Pulaskyr has been kind enough to share the study here with me." Alazyn stopped at the door off the small entry hall, again motioning for Quaeryt to enter. "He's out with Second Regiment at the moment … Second Tilboran, I should say."

The study was little more than an oblong room with a hearth at one end and a writing desk at the other, with two tall bookcases behind the table desk and against the tan plaster wall. The two windows in the outside wall were chest high, with small leaded panes cloudy with age. Two armless chairs stood before the desk. Quaeryt walked to the nearer one and seated himself, then waited for Alazyn to sit down in the other.

Alazyn did so, then said, "You and Commander Pulaskyr were together in Tilbor, I understand."

"We were in Tilbor at the same time, but we never actually served anywhere together. He was in charge of all operations north of the Boran Hills, and I was with Marshal Rescalyn in the south. We never even met until after the hill holders' revolt was put down." *And even then we barely had a chance to speak to each other.* "I understand he was very effective in dealing with the northern hill holders."

"He said that you were largely responsible for the way things turned out in the south."

"He is *far* too generous. The entire campaign in the south was planned and masterfully carried out by Governor Rescalyn, and finished by Submarshal Myskyl."

"The governor died in the last battle, Commander Pulaskyr told me. Did you see any of that?"

Quaeryt smiled wryly. "No. I was unhorsed by a heavy cavalryman moments before Rescalyn fell." That wasn't quite true, but it was what Quaeryt had said all along, and what everyone, including Myskyl, believed. "Have you yet been instructed as to where Nineteenth Regiment will be assigned?"

"Just a dispatch yesterday saying that we were assigned to special duty under your command, sir … and that specific orders would come from you."

"Eleventh and Nineteenth Regiments, and the one company remaining from Fifth Battalion that was not Khellan, have been assigned to support Lady Vaelora and me in our duties as envoys to the High Council of Khel…" Quaeryt went on to explain.

When Quaeryt finished, Alazyn tilted his head, almost quizzically. “I’m not certain I understand why Lord Bhayar … has taken this approach. Isn’t taking a woman, even Lord Bhayar’s sister…?”

At that moment, Quaeryt realized he’d assumed that Alazyn knew more than he did. “There are several reasons. First, both Lord Bhayar and Lady Vaelora are part Pharsi. Second, I’m the highest ranking officer of full Pharsi blood in the Telaryn forces. Third, I was the one in command of all the Pharsi officers who are already in Khel offering Lord Bhayar’s terms.” He paused. “And there is the small matter that Lady Vaelora is my wife.”

Alazyn’s eyes widened, if but for a moment.

“I take it that no one bothered to mention those facts to you,” said Quaeryt dryly.

“Ah … no, sir.”

“That’s not surprising. At times, senior officers assume subordinates know everything they do.” Quaeryt laughed humorously. “As I just did.” After a moment he went on. “Please ask any and all questions you may have … even if you worry that they may indicate you don’t know something. In situations like this, the only stupid questions are the ones you don’t ask.”

“Yes, sir.” Alazyn looked away from Quaeryt. “Is it true that you’re an imager?”

“Yes, but I’m one of about ten, and the other imagers will be accompanying us as well…”

More than a glass passed before Quaeryt had answered all of Alazyn’s questions and departed the hold house for the ride back to the outskirts of Variana.

4

Quaeryt barely had time to wash up and change out of his muddy undress uniform into his only set of dress greens, except, as was the case with all his uniforms, the jacket shirt and trousers were green tinted with brown, to show his scholar background. Then he joined Vaelora in their sitting room-prior to walking down to the formal dining room of the estate house for dinner with Bhayar, the first dinner they had shared with him in weeks.

"You look beautiful." Quaeryt appraised his wife, who wore a long black dress with a silver and black jacket.

"I can barely fit into this."

"That doesn't show."

"It will before long," said Vaelora. "I worried you'd forgotten we were having dinner…"

"No. I had to meet with Skarpa and Major Zhelan. I also dropped in and paid my respects to Submarshal Myskyl, then rode out and met with Subcommander Alazyn."

"How was the good submarshal?"

"We were very polite. He intimated that Khel would be loyal to Bhayar and that if it weren't, it would be my fault. I said that Khel had never been loyal to Kharst and the Pharsi Khellans especially didn't see Bhayar as Kharst's successor, but that I would certainly endeavor to establish such loyalty. He intimated that I was a devious schemer, if one enthusiastically loyal to Bhayar. I blandly noted that his and Rescalyn's actions in Tilbor were masterful, and that I had learned much from them. We parted with amicable words."

"But far from amicably."

"Politely. He's never liked nor trusted me, and I certainly don't trust him. More important, I don't think your brother should. Ever."

"While you were ill, dearest, as I may have mentioned, we did discuss that. He will watch both Deucalon and Myskyl closely. He does believe that they have their uses."

"Don't we all?"

"Of course. Yours are just more valuable and longer lasting. And … we should be joining dear brother, dearest…" murmured Vaelora.

Quaeryt grinned. "A polite reminder to begin escorting you down the stairs and into dinner. Do you know who else will be there?"

"Marshal Deucalon, I believe, and perhaps several others."

"Officers … local High Holders?"

"Brother dear did not convey that information to me."

When they reached the main level and had walked a good fifty yards toward the front of the large hold house, they came to an

undercaptain standing by the open door to the chamber adjoining the dining room. “Lady, Commander…”

“Thank you.” Quaeryt allowed Vaelora to guide him while giving the impression that he was the one leading, into the sitting room … or reception chamber.

There, Bhayar and Deucalon stood talking, half facing the window overlooking one of the already frost-killed gardens. Near the hearth at the end of the room away from the open double doors leading to the formal dining chamber stood two other men. One was white-haired, with a lined but tanned face, who wore the vestments of a chorister of the Nameless. The other, gray-haired, wore a formal black jacket and a pale gray shirt, with a high collar.

Bhayar turned. “Vaelora, Quaeryt…” He smiled at her. “You are lovely this evening.”

“You commanded that I look my best,” replied Vaelora with an expression just short of mischievous.

“You both know Marshal Deucalon, of course. The distinguished-looking chorister there is Amalyt D’Anomen. He has been the chorister of the Anomen Regis … before it was damaged by the storms created in the battle. The equally distinguished personage in black is Chamion D’Council, the head councilor of the city of Variana.” Bhayar turned to the two local officials. “Commander Quaeryt is the most battle-wounded and tested of my commanders, and also the husband of my charming youngest sister, Vaelora.”

Both the chorister and the councilor inclined their heads.

“The commander is also an imager and a scholar,” added Bhayar. “We’ve known each other since we were students, but that’s never prevented him from disagreeing with me.”

“Battle-wounded…?” ventured Amalyt. “I would not have thought…” He shook his head and added, almost apologetically, “Scholars here are much … different, it appears.”

“You might explain, Quaeryt,” suggested Bhayar. “Briefly.”

“I never set out to be an officer,” began Quaeryt. “I was pressed into service in the revolt in Tilbor. After the revolt, I served briefly as princeps of Tilbor, then as temporary governor of Montagne province after the earthquake and eruption there, long enough to restore order, before being called to serve as a subcommander in the campaign that led to Variana.”

“Commander Quaeryt proved most effective in leading from the front and forging somewhat inexperienced troops and officers into a most effective and devastating force,” said Deucalon smoothly. “He came close to dying at least twice.”

“I do believe dinner is waiting,” said Bhayar, nodding toward the open double doors, standing back, and then following the others.

A shorter table had been set, with screens shortening the room and blocking off the long table. Bhayar stood behind the chair at the end closest to the double doors from the sitting room, while Deucalon took the chair at the end of the table opposite Bhayar. To Bhayar's right was Chamion, and to his left was Vaelora. Amalyt was seated below Vaelora, and Quaeryt below Chamion.

Once the others were seated, Bhayar settled himself at the head of the table and waited for the ranker in formal greens to fill the crystal goblets with a pale amber vintage. Then he raised his goblet. "My appreciation to our guests for their courtesy in joining us."

"And our appreciation to you, Lord Bhayar," replied Chamion in a raspy deep voice, "for seeking us out."

After everyone had drunk, or sipped, the toast, and as the uniformed servers began slipping soup bowls before the diners, Bhayar spoke again. "I sought you out in hopes you could provide observations and other thoughts that will make the next months … less disruptive for everyone."

"If I might say so, Lord Bhayar," replied Amalyt immediately, with a slightly testy edge to his voice, "the very fact of your inviting us suggests that you wish the choristers of the Nameless to be supportive of your rule. While I certainly would rather have peace than anarchy or continuing conflict, I would suggest that the Nameless cannot be invoked as supporting or opposing any ruler…"

Bhayar glanced to Quaeryt.

"Honored Chorister," began Quaeryt, "Rex Kharst attacked Telaryn with no warning or provocation after he learned that the former and ancient capital of Telaryn had been partly destroyed by fire and earthquake. When Lord Bhayar responded, Rex Kharst immediately threatened all his people and High Holders with death and worse if they so much as sold a single keg of flour to the armed forces of Telaryn. He had his own men burn the fields of poor tenants. He dispatched assassins against his own High Holders. Lord Bhayar and all his commanders have taken great pains to avoid creating unnecessary suffering for the people of Bovaria, and he has treated them far more fairly than did Rex Kharst."

"I cannot dispute you, Commander, nor would I even if your words were not true, although I must admit that at least some of what you say, and perhaps more, is unhappily so. My concern and belief is that such views not be discussed in the anomen."

"I can understand your feelings, Chorister Amalyt," responded Quaeryt in as gentle but firm a voice as he could manage, "but so far as I am aware, and you may certainly correct me if I misspeak, the Nameless stands above physically taking sides in the conflicts of men. Yet … over time, those who have served the Nameless have often

expressed their views about the practices of rulers and High Holders and whether those practices were in accord with the precepts set forth as worthy of the Nameless. If I recall correctly"-Quaeryt paused just slightly, then continued-"in olden times, the noted chorister Tharyn Arysyn barred even Rholan the Unnamer from the north anomen in Montagne, not far from Rholan's own home, saying that only those who had studied the Nameless could speak and that Rholan's teachings were not in accord with the ways of Tela. Perhaps I am misinterpreting that history, but it would appear that the chorister was using the imprimatur of the Nameless in support of the way things were, and that includes the ways of ruling. Likewise, is it not true that when barely a man, Rholan supported the Chorister Sumaal, when Sumaal allowed High Holder Quintus of Montagne to proclaim the unfitness of Lord Suffryk of Tela to rule? As I have read, Rholan declared that Sumaal was only doing what any good chorister should do in allowing Quintus to apply the precepts of the Nameless to rulers as well as to the common man, the tradesman, the factor, or the High Holder." Quaeryt looked to Amalyt, waiting.

"You appear unusually well read in matters concerning the Nameless," replied the chorister, "yet times and people demand … certain adjustments … to … older practices."

"Rholan had some words for that, I believe," said Quaeryt. "Justice is what men should do, while law is what codes and powers require them to do, and that is invariably less than what they should do or what the Nameless requires of them. Your words suggest that choristers must refrain from applying the precepts of the Nameless to rulers. Would it be inaccurate, or against the precepts to which you have devoted your life, to declare that, while war is indeed deplorable, and that many suffered in the conflict, Lord Bhayar has behaved more honorably than the previous ruler of Bovaria, and that you trust he will continue to do so … and that you will measure his behavior and acts, as you do those of all men, against the precepts of the Nameless?"

A wry smile appeared on Amalyt's lips. "You are a dangerous man, Commander, especially for one so comparatively young. If I speak against your words, I appear unreasonable to you … and to a lesser amount, to myself. Yet if I raise my voice in support of Lord Bhayar, most of my congregants will discredit me."

"Then do not speak in support of Lord Bhayar," replied Quaeryt. "Tell your congregants that, so far, matters have been far better than anyone could have hoped in a war of such scope and that Lord Bhayar has behaved honorably, unlike the late Rex Kharst, and that the test of Lord Bhayar's character and acts will come in the months and years ahead."

Amalyt turned to Bhayar. “He is most persuasive, is he not?”

“I have found him persuasive not because of his words, but because of his judgment.” Bhayar offered a slightly crooked smile. “I will not say that I have always found his words agreeable. But his counsel is seldom wrong, even when he was but a modest scholar. Quaeryt has studied more history, and forgotten more than I ever learned, for all that his tutor and mine attempted to require us to learn.”

“I suspect you know more than you allow,” suggested Chamion.

“That is a trait of all rulers,” said Amalyt, “and one cannot blame them.”

“It’s true of all men of ability,” added Deucalon.

After a moment of silence, the councilor spoke again. “There was much destruction in the western part of Variana … of a rather strange and mysterious nature.”

“There was,” agreed Bhayar. “That often occurs in war.”

Chamion frowned.

“Perhaps,” suggested Vaelora, “the councilor meant to inquire about what you plan to do there.”

“We have already rebuilt the exterior and interior of the Chateau Regis, thanks to Commander Quaeryt and his officers, and we have begun to refurbish it. We will restore the lands as time and golds permit. I will see … perhaps … about repairs to some anomens.”

Quaeryt understood the implications of the word “perhaps.”

“But … what of all the others…?”

“I cannot afford to rebuild all that Rex Kharst destroyed in Telaryn. Surely you do not expect me to rebuild all that has been destroyed here as a result of Kharst’s unwise decisions.”

“One could hope … for … some assistance.”

“On that, we will have to see once Bovaria is settled once more.”

“You have said little, either here or in public, Lord Bhayar, about High Holders … whether they or their heirs might still hold their lands, or whether you plan great changes.” Chamion looked to the head of the table.

“There will doubtless be some changes in holdings, councilor,” replied Bhayar. “There were some High Holders whose behavior was so egregious as to merit loss of position and lands, and there may be others who perished in the fighting without direct heirs. In general, I do not plan to replace reasonable and effective High Holders unless they give me cause. Some may lose a portion of their lands, as I see fit, depending on circumstances, but I believe these matters will sort themselves out over the next few months.”

“And choristers?” asked Amalyt.

“Unless a chorister incites against me or causes others to do so, I

have no plans to replace choristers. I reserve the right to do so, but would only do so for cause."

Amalyt offered a nod that was as much grudging as accepting.

"Might I inquire as how you plan to rule both Bovaria and Telaryn?" Chamion glanced from Deucalon to Bhayar.

"As one land, with the same laws for both … in time, of course. Anything else would not be fair." Bhayar laughed musically. "Anything else wouldn't work well for long, either."

After another three courses, a dessert of pear tarts, and a sparkling wine … and more questions and much carefully worded conversation, Bhayar eased back his chair, then rose. "Chorister Amalyt, Councilor Chamion … it was a pleasure to get to know you. I trust that we will all be able to work together to assure that the future is more promising than the past."

"That would be our hope as well," replied Chamion.

Amalyt merely nodded and said, "Lord Bhayar."

After the two Bovarians had departed, Bhayar nodded for Deucalon, Quaeryt, and Vaelora to join him in the reception room, although once there, he did not seat himself.

"Marshal, what are your thoughts?"

"They're like all functionaries. They'll accept matters as they are going to be, and they won't openly oppose you. For now, they won't even do so behind closed doors. They will strive to position themselves favorably." Deucalon cleared his throat. "You've never said about High Holders…"

"That's because we don't have a complete accounting yet. It appears as though close to fifty High Holders were killed in the battle of Variana and the aftermath. Most died when the Chateau Regis froze solid." Bhayar smiled. "That worked out rather well, because the majority of those were those closest and most loyal to Kharst."

"From what I observed during the campaign," said Quaeryt, "those most loyal to Kharst would most likely be High Holders of the kind least disposed to an honest and direct ruler."

"Deucalon," said Bhayar, nodding to the marshal, "and I made similar observations from what we saw. That is another reason for dispatching Submarshal Myskyl to the north and west and Submarshal Skarpa to the south. Until they return, we will not know how many high holdings there are in which we will have to replace the holder. There will certainly be those who will need to be replaced with more reliable and loyal High Holders. Such replacement will have to wait until all is largely settled, but it will happen."

"I can see that," said Deucalon, "and I am glad to hear it."

"I'm sure you can, and I'll be taking your counsel in that." Bhayar smiled at Deucalon. "I'll be walking back to my quarters with Vaelora

and Quaeryt."

"Yes, sir." Deucalon smiled politely, bowing slightly before turning and departing.

"That went about as well as it could have," observed Bhayar.

"You've been having dinners like that for weeks?" said Quaeryt.

"Not every evening, but more than I'd like. How are your imagers doing?"

"They all recovered far more quickly than I did. Would you like me to see if they can make some repairs to Amalyt's anomen?"

"If it does not strain them for the journey west."

"Are you sending them all with me because I'll need them, or because you want to see how matters are here without us around?"

Bhayar shrugged. "There are reasons. Those are some of them. Imagers are another form of power. I'd like to believe that they're the kind of power the Pharsi can respect."

"Once the imagers are settled, they should wear gray."

"Settled?" The Lord of Telaryn raised his eyebrows.

"On the isle of piers," Quaeryt reminded Bhayar.

"Gray?" Bhayar frowned.

"The black of mourning mixed with the white of ice. Call it a reminder of what the excesses of imaging can do. The imagers will need that reminder. So will a few others."

Bhayar looked at his sister. "He doesn't give up, does he?"

"You wouldn't be here, dear brother, if he were a man who did."

Bhayar winced at the polite chill in Vaelora's voice. "I can see I'm outnumbered." He laughed softly. "The isle of piers and gray uniforms it is, but only after you and I-and Vaelora-are all agreed that matters are settled. Is that all?"

"For now," said Quaeryt cheerfully.

"I fear I may hear that from you two for some time."

"It was your idea that we wed," said Vaelora sweetly.

"It was a good idea," replied Bhayar, "but even the most beautiful rose has thorns, and the most useful knife can slice the user." He walked toward the door. "Tell me what you expect from the Pharsi while we walk back to our quarters."

"They will expect to be treated with respect, and most likely, as you pointed out, many of those on the High Council will be women. They will be leery of a strange Pharsi officer from Telaryn, but Vaelora will help…"

By the time they reached the landing leading up to their tower chamber, where they parted with Bhayar, Quaeryt felt he had offered more qualifications and generalizations and fewer concrete observations and expectations than he would have preferred. He said little more until he and Vaelora were alone in their sitting room.

“I was surprised that he actually accepted my suggestions about Myskyl and Skarpa. I’m even more surprised that he mentioned what he’d done at dinner.”

“Oh? How do you think he could admit you were right without actually saying so?”

“There is that. But I’ve never thought of myself as a great speaker.”

“You? After giving all those wonderful homilies?”

“Homilies are different from conversations at dinners involving matters of state where every word and expression is weighed and analyzed.”

“You remind me of Rholan,” said Vaelora.

“Me?”

“Wait a moment.” She walked to the table that held the small brown leatherbound volume and began to leaf through it. “Here. Just listen to this.”

Quaeryt listened.

“To hear Rholan converse, one would never have guessed at his power when he spoke to believers or to deliver a homily. Some years back, when Rholan was visiting the small hamlet of Korisynt on the lands of High Holder Klaertyn, the people gathered to hear Rholan, and they petitioned him to beg for flour from the High Holder, for drought and burning heat had scorched their fields. They had already been refused by Klaertyn, who claimed that he had no flour or grain to spare. Klaertyn heard that the people had gathered, and he rode down to the hamlet with a score of armsmen to disperse them. When they saw the High Holder, they once more begged for flour so that they could have bread, and again he said he had none.

“Then Rholan stepped forward and said to Klaertyn in that strangely powerful voice, ‘Tell your people that you have no grain for them, or no flour. Tell them, when this very day you have sold barrels of fine flour to the factors of Cloisonyt. Tell them that your armsmen did not see this.’ Klaertyn could not say such without branding himself a liar. So he made the best of it, and told the people of the hamlet that his steward would deliver barrels of flour on the morrow. And he did. But he never forgot, and, subsequently, when an outbreak of the Red Death struck Korisynt, leaving no family unscathed, and some with no survivors at all, High Holder Klaertyn removed the survivors, razed all the structures, and planted saplings, primarily oaks and goldenwoods, so that by the time of his grandsons, no one would know that such a town had ever existed, and already, as I write this, few remember, and some choristers believe that Rholan made up the entire incident.”

When Vaelora finished, she looked at her husband. “You see?”

“I’m not Rholan.”

“No … you could be more … if you let Bhayar claim much of the credit for what you do.”

Quaeryt decided to let her have the last word on that … because, much as it sometimes galled him, he knew she was right. So he put his arms around her and embraced her gently, holding her silently for a long, long time.

5

Sunlight poured in through the small leaded panes of the tower window on Vendrei morning barely after dawn. The diffused illumination turned the top of the ancient oak bedstead a dark gold, a gold Quaeryt had restored from the white to which his semiconscious imaging had turned everything around him after the battle. He still wasn't certain that their chambers looked as they once had, although he had needed to re-image the finish of the stone walls and the floor more than once to meet Vaelora's standards.

Quaeryt turned slightly, reaching for her, only to find that she already had moved to a sitting position in the wide bed and was propping another pillow behind her back.

Quaeryt smiled broadly at her.

"Not this morning, dearest. My back is aching, and I'm sore all over. No one mentioned that those sorts of things happened when you're with child."

"I wouldn't know," he admitted.

"Both Bhayar and Deucalon were eager to mention you are an imager, but neither mentioned that you had acted as a chorister? Bhayar even made sure that never came up."

"You know exactly what that means, devious woman."

"Me? Devious? How could you say that? I was the one who approached you in the beginning, was I not?"

"I stand corrected. Perhaps you'd prefer 'deceptively direct,' dear one?"

Vaelora laughed, that low husky sound that Quaeryt had always liked. "For all that you protest, dearest, you do have a way with words … and not just in delivering homilies."

"I wish you were receptive to my other ways…" Quaeryt grinned, mock-lasciviously.

Vaelora arched both eyebrows. "What are your plans for the day?"

"I have to plan for the day?" When Vaelora only replied with a despairing look, Quaeryt finally answered her question. "I will rise, wash up, dress, eat breakfast, and proceed from there."

"What about the nineteen glasses you've left out?"

"And when I finish, I'll try to get seven solid glasses of sleep."

"Dearest…"

Because that long-drawn out word was not an endearment, Quaeryt capitulated. "I need to meet with the imager undercaptains individually, especially Khalis and Lhandor. Skarpa and I also need to talk over the arrangements for travel for nine-odd regiments. If the

day goes the way they usually do, I'll discover more that I will have to deal with. Oh … and I may send imagers to repair an anomen." He smiled as cheerfully as he could. "What about you?"

"Trying to get the estate seamstress to sew some riding clothes that will fit me in the months ahead."

"In three days?"

"I can be persuasive, you've always said."

"That you are, and you've persuaded me that it's time to get up." Quaeryt did not quite bound from the bed.

"Of course, dearest."

Quaeryt didn't bother hiding the wince, especially since Vaelora left the bed in a movement carrying hints of a flounce … and disapproval.

Washing up and dressing were accomplished with polite phrases.

Early as they were in getting to the small breakfast room that served only the three of them, Bhayar was getting up from the table when Quaeryt and Vaelora appeared.

"You're up earlier today."

"Quaeryt is feeling much more energetic these mornings," said Vaelora brightly.

This time, Quaeryt managed not to wince.

Bhayar laughed. "I've heard those words from someone else. At least, you're still talking to each other. Or should be." With a smile he glanced at Quaeryt. "We'll talk before I have dinner. I'm entertaining several High Holders from the northeast of Variana-at their request."

"After you sent an indirect invitation?" Quaeryt doubted any Bovarian High Holder would request a meeting with Bhayar without some indication of receptivity and personal safety.

"Something like that."

"You'd like to see me at fifth glass?"

"Around then."

Once Bhayar had left them alone in the breakfast chamber, Vaelora said quietly, "You are fortunate, dearest, that I am slightly more forgiving than Aelina … but only slightly."

"I've always said I was fortunate in you," Quaeryt murmured in reply, breaking off what else he might have said as the serving girl appeared with two mugs.

"Tea, sir and Lady?"

"Please," said Vaelora.

Quaeryt nodded, then added, after the server had set the mugs before them and departed to bring breakfast, "Very fortunate, but it is difficult at times not to appreciate you excessively."

"I do appreciate your affection. I cannot always accept it in the spirit in which it is offered."

Those words hold all too many meanings. "I understand." *How could you not, even if you don't like it?*

Vaelora offered a smile. "You are a very stubborn man."

"You wouldn't wish me otherwise."

"Nor I either, dearest."

He chuckled ruefully.

After breakfast, Quaeryt made his way from the hold house and was waiting in the foyer at the estate guest house and staff headquarters when Zhelan returned following muster.

"Commander?"

"It will be a busy day. I'll start with the imagers…"

"They're in the second tack room off the main stables. That was the best I could do."

"That will be fine. After that, I'll need an escort squad to the boat piers serving the Great Canal. Have you seen Kharst's canal boat?"

"No, sir."

"Good. That might be the first thing in weeks where you haven't anticipated me. Have you been able to locate a scholars' house, or a scholarium?"

"Yes, sir," replied Zhelan. "There's one some four to five milles up the river, on this side. There's also one, I'm told, that's even larger in Laaryn."

"I'll need a squad to accompany me to the one upriver tomorrow. I need to see the scholars before we leave on Lundi. Are there any supplies we're short of that you need me to persuade someone to release or find?"

"No, sir."

"Good." *Not that it's as good as all that.* Quaeryt suspected that Zhelan was having little difficulty because any senior Telaryn officer would be pleased to see Quaeryt leaving Variana. "Plan on two glasses before I'll need to leave for the piers. Oh … and some of the imagers will need a squad to escort them to the Anomen Regis … the one across from the Chateau Regis."

Zhelan offered a look of inquiry.

"Lord Bhayar would like to offer some repairs to the chorister there. Let's go and see the undercaptains." Quaeryt turned and walked toward the door. When he stepped outside, back into the cool late-autumn air, he saw several commanders walking toward them.

"Greetings," offered Pulaskyr, one of the few Quaeryt knew by more than name.

"Greetings."

Pulaskyr stopped a yard from Quaeryt. "How are you finding Subcommander Alazyn?"

"He seems well grounded and not difficult to work with." As

Quaeryt spoke, he couldn't help but notice how the other three commanders eased away from them and slipped into the building serving as headquarters. "I believe that's your doing, and I do appreciate it."

"Thank you. I did tell Skarpa that I thought he'd do well under your command."

"He'd mentioned that."

"You're heading west?"

"To try to persuade the Khellans that they'd do better under Bhayar. It's better than another campaign," Quaeryt said.

"If it doesn't turn into one," replied Pulaskyr with a laugh. With a smile the older commander turned and continued into the building.

Quaeryt and Zhelan turned and walked toward the main stable, then through the open sliding doors and to the second tack room.

When Quaeryt stepped into the small room, with its racked saddles and bridles and other gear, the eight imager undercaptains all stiffened to attention.

"As you were." Quaeryt stood just inside the door and waited a moment. "Among other things, I wanted to tell all of you how impressed I am with the work you did in restoring and repairing the Chateau Regis. I was there the other day and had a good look around. You did yourselves proud, all of you." He smiled broadly, then went on to explain the mission assigned by Bhayar … and the day's chore of accomplishing what repairs they could on the Anomen Regis. When he finished, he asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"Just two regiments and first company heading into Khel, sir?" asked Desyrk.

"And all of you. That should be sufficient." *I hope.* "Besides, bringing a larger force would suggest we intend to fight. We may have to, but that's not Lord Bhayar's intention. I'd like to think that the High Council will prove reasonable. I'm not much interested in slaughtering people who should be allies, but the last thing we need is another independent country in Lydar, and the last thing the Khellans need is to make Bhayar angry. Our job is to get those messages across."

The questions after that involved details, the answers to some of which Quaeryt referred to Zhelan. When there were no more questions, Quaeryt announced, "I'll be meeting briefly with each of you, beginning with Undercaptain Voltyr. The rest of you can wait outside."

In moments Quaeryt and Voltyr stood alone in the small tack room, Quaeryt half marveling at how much had changed in the year and a half since the summer day when Voltyr and Quaeryt had been sitting on the porch of the scholarium in Solis and Voltyr had asked

Quaeryt, then a mere scholar assistant to Bhayar, what he hoped to gain from traveling to Tilbor.

"You did an outstanding job in supervising the others in refinishing the inside of the Chateau Regis. I hope you can do something with the anomen today, as well."

Voltyr shifted his weight from one boot to the other, smiling almost sheepishly, although Quaeryt thought he saw a certain spark in Voltyr's gray eyes.

Finally, the undercaptain replied, "I kept them on task. I'm no crafter. Baelthm was the one who made sure all the imaging was perfect, and he did most of the final smooth-imaging, if you will. They also had to repair some of the outside ornamentation as well."

"I appreciate the honesty. Is there anything he did that was particularly outstanding?"

"The frieze over the main entrance was totally destroyed. Baelthm and Lhandor created the entire scene from nothing."

"That scene of the chateau rising above the gardens? They did that?"

"Yes, sir." Voltyr smiled slightly. "You might not have noticed, but … do you recall the riders on the left side, opposite the images meant to be Bhayar and the senior officers?"

"I recall the hunters. A small grouping…"

"Their leader bears a remarkable similarity to a certain recently promoted commander. Baelthm told me he would prefer you not know."

"Thank you for letting me know. How were the other imagers?"

"Threkhyl was most helpful in rearranging the exterior steps and walls, as was Horan. Smaethyl helped all around. So did Desyrk. Khalis was almost as good as Baelthm with the details, and he works hard, harder than the others. He reminds me of Shaelyt."

"I miss Shaelyt," replied Quaeryt. "He was a good imager, and he would have been a superior officer." *Is that why there are so many like Myskyl and Deucalon as senior officers? Because the ones who won't order their men to do anything unless they've done it or are doing it have a greater chance of getting killed before they can get promoted out of danger?*

The next undercaptain Quaeryt saw was Threkhyl.

"I understand you were most helpful in restructuring the front area of the Chateau Regis."

"The whole front of the chateau was a mess. That wasn't from our imaging, either. Chateau that big, and a narrow drive barely wide enough for a single carriage…" Threkhyl shook his head and continued on.

After listening to Threkhyl, Quaeryt talked to Desyrk, always reserved and polite, and then waited for Baelthm, the oldest of the

imager undercaptains, and by far the weakest imager.

"Good morning, Commander." Baelthm inclined his head.

"Good morning. Undercaptain Voltyr has told me, without your artistic talent, refinishing the interior of the Chateau Regis would have taken longer and been of far lesser quality."

"Some of it, sir, was just using imaging to strengthen what was there and to bond it back to the stone, especially on the inner outside walls … not all that bad. Smaethyl and Horan, even Threkhyl, helped with the heavy imaging. You taught me how to do more than I thought I could. Still needed help."

"You and Lhandor had to recreate the main entry frieze?"

Baelthm snorted. "No one could tell us even what had been there. Now that, sir, I'll have to say, took some doing. Whatever you did to the outer walls … well, it made them harder than any stone I've ever seen, and whatever was there before collapsed. I think it was a plaster cast or carved plaster or something just as soft. Took both me and young Lhandor, sir. I'm a crafter, maybe an imager crafter, but a crafter. No artist. Lhandor, he made the design and drew the figures, and then we worked on it together. Solid young fellow, he is…"

Quaeryt mostly listened, as he did with Horan and Smaethyl.

After them came Lhandor, one of the two remaining Pharsi undercaptains.

"Lhandor, Baelthm was most complimentary of your design of the ornamentation…"

"Thank you, sir. I've always liked to draw." The young Pharsi officer looked down for a moment.

"Where did you learn that?"

"At home. My mother … she has skill along those lines. Her uncle was a cartographer back in Khel."

Quaeryt had suspected something along those lines, but Lhandor and Khalis had arrived in the middle of the campaign, and Quaeryt hadn't had the time to draw them out as much as he would have liked. "Where in Khel did your family come from?"

"Pointe Neiman. She came with my aunt as a child when my uncle had to … leave Khel many years ago. She never said why. I was raised near Estisle."

"Not Nacliano?"

"Oh, no, sir. They can't abide Pharsi there. A hamlet south on the south end of Estisle. It's mostly rocks there."

"What did your uncle do?"

"He drew maps for Ghasphar. He was the High Holder who owns all the diamond ships out of Estisle. I helped him, my uncle, some for the last year before … before I was sent to serve."

Quaeryt couldn't help but ask, "Does High Holder Ghasphar have

ties to Khel?"

"I heard that his grandfather was from Ouestan, but when I asked Uncle Haelyn about it, he told me not to say a word, especially not in Estisle."

"But you liked drawing things other than maps?" asked Quaeryt with a slight smile.

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like you to give some thought to something larger. If we are successful in bringing peace to Khel, Lord Bhayar is likely to be amenable to our creating something like a scholarium for imagers here in Variana. We would have to build it, of course, but … Is coming up with a rough design for that something you'd be interested in?"

"Yes, sir!" Lhandor paused. "But … where would it be? I mean … designs aren't much good if they're not suited to the place they'll be built."

"I don't know for certain, but the isle of piers is one possibility."

"Could I ride over there and look?"

"Of course. But you'll have to do it today … after you work on the anomen."

"I can do that, sir."

Quaeryt couldn't help but smile as the young Pharsi undercaptain departed with a spring in his step.

Khalis was the last of the undercaptains to enter the tack room, and the youngest. While he reminded Quaeryt of Shaelyt, with the exception of the light amber-honey Pharsi complexion and dark hair, there were few physical similarities. The resemblance lay more in the quiet thoughtfulness.

"Where will we be going in Khel, sir?"

"Generally up the Groral River from Kherseilles to Khelgror."

"That's a long way, farther than from Ferravyl to Variana, sir."

"True enough, but I'm hopeful we won't have to fight our way up the river."

"No, sir." Khalis moistened his lips. "Didn't Subcommander Calkoran … isn't that what he was supposed to be doing?"

"Lord Bhayar is concerned that the subcommander isn't likely to be believed without a certain … reinforcement."

"Even if they believe him, sir, they will likely want to talk and talk and talk."

"You've seen that?"

"Not in Khel, sir. Only in my family, but my grandpere said his father left Khel because he could never get anyone in the family there to agree with him."

"So he came to Lucayl where there was no one older to disagree?"

Quaeryt smiled.

"Something like that, sir." Khalis paused, then added, "Except my great-grandmere."

More likely it was the great-grandmere who wanted to leave. "That happens in some families."

When Quaeryt finished, he met briefly with Zhelan again.

It was well past the first glass of the afternoon before Quaeryt and fourth squad reached the river piers just north of where the Great Canal diverged from the River Aluse, heading westward across the mostly level lands south of Tuuryl to where, hundreds of milles farther west, it ended at the River Laar.

He made a careful inspection of Kharst's canal boat, then spent time seeing to the arrangements for supply boats, and the mules to tow all those required. After that, for close to a glass, he studied the master map of the canal, checking the distances and planning stops, then rode back to the hold house. Once there, after stabling the mare, he met again with Skarpa to talk over the logistics and the timetable for travel to Ephra.

He was waiting in the corridor outside Bhayar's study by two quints before fifth glass. He waited another quint before Bhayar summoned Quaeryt into the study.

"What have you been doing today?" asked the Lord of Telaryn.

Quaeryt told him, briefly.

"That sounds better than my day." Bhayar paused. "You've alluded to this before, but Myskyl cares little for you. Is there more to this than what happened with Rescalyn?"

"Does there have to be more than that?"

Bhayar laughed. "What happened today wasn't why I wanted to see you, but you might get a chuckle out of it." He motioned to the chairs in front of the table desk, then seated himself and waited for Quaeryt to sit down. "Myskyl accompanied Deucalon to the marshal's morning briefing here. Deucalon held up a letter and read from it. It was from a factor in Villerive. His name was Farrcoyn or Saarcoyn … something like that. This factor was professing his loyalty to me, but he also wrote to express his appreciation for one of my senior officers, a subcommander named Quaeryt, or some such. He wrote that you took possession of his dwelling and grounds after the battle of Villerive in a most professional manner, and that when you and your battalion departed, you left almost no trace of their occupation. He appreciated that."

Quaeryt frowned. "I recall that, but … what was the problem?"

"Deucalon was most displeased. He insisted that there was a vast difference between professionalism and unwarranted leniency. Myskyl said nothing." Bhayar smiled. "If you had been here, what would you

have said?"

"Something along the line that I would agree wholeheartedly with the marshal, that had the factor been uncooperative, my efforts not to destroy his livelihood would definitely have been unwarranted. But I would have pointed out that a number of High Holders who stripped their holdings of everything, including provisions we could have used, are being allowed to retain those lands and holdings. I don't believe that you, or those of us serving you, should employ one standard for factors and another for High Holders, especially when the factor in question was nearly as wealthy as some lesser High Holders. Doing so would undercut your support among the factors without gaining you any more support at all among the High Holders."

Bhayar nodded. "I thought your reply might be something like that. I merely thanked the marshal for his concerns and said I would bring the matter up with you."

"I suspect Myskyl brought the matter to Deucalon's attention. I would not wish to speculate on why that might be."

"Vaelora would … and has."

"She is often more perceptive than I … and more careful in her words."

"And if Myskyl did suggest Deucalon's words?"

"You would know far better than I," Quaeryt pointed out.

"What I do know is that I'll be relieved when my submarshals are away from Variana and you are on your way to Khel." Bhayar sat back slightly and tilted his head to the left. "That leaves another matter. Do you honestly believe that you and your imagers can rein in the High Holders in the years to come?"

"Don't you?"

"You weren't exactly as effective as you could have been in Montagne."

"I was as effective as necessary in order to restore order. And … I was acting alone. The outcry would have died away."

"Especially if something … an accident or sickness … had happened to another High Holder?"

Quaeryt nodded.

"You are capable of that. I know."

"I'd prefer not to act that way, but it's far better to remove one man than fight uprisings and rebellions."

"How long will it take?"

"As necessary, we can begin to do what needs to be done once I return from Khel."

"Not until then?" A faint, almost humorous smile flitted across Bhayar's lips.

"You need to give the High Holders time to misbehave. That way,

any accidents or illnesses will be seen as a result of their actions and not mere greed for their lands on your part."

"But not too much time."

"No." Quaeryt shook his head. "But you will need to allow us the resources to build the scholarium. The imagers cannot be seen as merely your tool. We need to prove useful to many, so that the people, especially in Khel and Bovaria, will support them."

"And not in Telaryn?"

"That will come, but it is not as necessary."

"I suppose not." Bhayar stretched, then stood. "I'd best ready myself for a long dinner."

"Better you than me."

"Your turn will come, right after you return."

If I return successfully. "We'll face that then."

"Along with more than you ever dreamed possible, Quaeryt."

"You're so encouraging."

"What else can I be when you're married to Vaelora?"

"Remind me to talk to Aelina when she arrives."

"Don't worry. You won't have to. Vaelora will tell you everything." Bhayar gestured toward the study door. "Go."

Quaeryt grinned, then bowed, turned, and made his way out.

6

At two quints before ninth glass on Samedi morning, Quaeryt had just stamped and then brushed his muddy boots off on the stone floor of the south-facing covered porch of the scholarium some five milles north of the Chateau Regis.

Nearly two glasses to cover four milles on what wouldn't have been called a path in Telaryn. Were all the side roads in Bovaria that bad, or was that because the scholars were in as much disfavor in Bovaria as in Telaryn? *You may find out shortly.*

He glanced back below the porch at the terraced gardens, their low walls composed of local stones stacked and barely fitted together. The ground between the walls was bare, and the stalks and stubble had been turned under the soil, crudely, for Quaeryt could see parts of stalks protruding.

He turned. Two rankers, hands on the hilts of their sabres, stood behind him as he crossed the porch to the door, still carrying full heavy imaging shields. Before Quaeryt reached the door, it opened.

"Who might you be?" offered the lean, almost emaciated, man with straggly blond hair, who wore scholars' browns of a somewhat different cut than those worn by the scholars of Telaryn.

"Quaeryt Rytersyn, scholar and commander in the Southern Army of Telaryn. I'm here to see the maitre."

The scholar glanced at the two armed rankers and the mounted squad drawn up at the foot of the stone steps, then back at Quaeryt. "I don't suppose we can exactly stop you."

"I have no ill intentions."

"I suppose not, not if you are asking. If you would follow me, sir…"

Quaeryt ignored the grudging tone of the "sir" and followed the scholar into the two-story oblong brick structure. The rankers followed, the second closing the door.

The scholar walked through a square entry hall floored with boot-scarred slate and down a narrow corridor to a dark gold oak door, half ajar. "Maitre, there's a Telaryn commander here to see you. Says he's a scholar."

"Then have him come in, Brialt."

"Thank you." Quaeryt image-projected absolute authority and stepped past the scholar, ignoring the audible gulp, and closed the door behind himself. "I'm Quaeryt Rytersyn, maitre, a scholar from Solis." *Among other things.*

The white-haired and bent scholar did not rise from the narrow desk, but peered up at Quaeryt, his eyes wide as he took in the

brownish green uniform and the commander's insignia. Finally, he spoke in Bovarian. "You command a powerful presence, a strength of purpose I have never sensed before."

"I am who I am."

"You wear a uniform, yet you say you are a scholar."

"I was raised a scholar in Solis, then was a scholar assistant to Lord Bhayar before serving in the Tilboran rebellion and becoming an officer."

"You know we are not scholars like those in Solis."

Quaeryt was only slightly surprised at the standard phrasing, and he replied in kind. "I did not expect that you would be exactly the same. Nor does the moon have sons she acknowledges openly, yet learning exists under moonlight or sunlight, for all that the hunter may be Artiema's guardian."

"I suppose I must welcome you, Quaeryt Rytersyn. I am Charpentier D'Scholarium, and Scholar Maitre of Variana. Might I ask what brings you here?"

"Part of my duties to Lord Bhayar is to talk to the scholars of Bovaria. You represent the scholars here."

"Only here." Charpentier offered a raspy laugh. "Only in this poor scholarium. Once this was the smallest of the three in and around Variana. Now … it is all that remains."

Quaeryt eased himself into the rickety-looking single armless wooden chair across the desk from the maitre. "How did that come to be?"

"It is a long story … and a sad one."

Quaeryt nodded.

"In the time of Rex Haarl, the father of Rex Kharst, the scholars were respected. Every scholarium received golds from the nearby anomens. Not many, but enough to supplement what we earned from the schools and to maintain the scholarium. Then … when Rex Kharst succeeded his sire and took the Chateau Regis, things changed." The maitre sighed. "Had we but known, but yesterday is always so much clearer than tomorrow. You would think we go through life like a man riding backward in a coach, seeing everything after we pass it, if not later, facing where we have been, rather than where we are headed."

"And what happened?" prompted Quaeryt.

"Rex Kharst … he ordered that the anomens not give golds to the scholaria. He said that worship belonged in the anomens, and scholars in the scholaria, and choristers should not use their golds to influence what scholars taught, and scholars should not teach what choristers wanted students to believe. The choristers were not unhappy, for they had never cared much for the old custom."

"And the choristers and the anomens prospered?"

"You should see behind the walls of the modest dwelling of Chorister Amalyt … or Chorister Bruisn." Charpentier gave a sniffling snort, then wiped his nose with his sleeve. "When Rex Kharst raised the tariffs on the local crafters and merchants, and the factors, fewer would send their boys to the school … and there were not even silvers to spare. We expanded the gardens and sold our beer, and it was a fine beer, but the brewers of Variana complained, and the armsmen of the rex came and smashed the brewery. That was three years ago."

Quaeryt nodded slowly. "Kharst was not good for scholars or for Bovaria."

"Who could say such?" The old scholar looked at Quaeryt, then said in a lower voice, "We prayed to the Nameless to grant us a scholar with the power to advise our ruler. Or even for another rex." He laughed, his aged voice cracking. "From what I see of you, we received what we prayed for. Exactly what we prayed for."

"Have you no students?"

"We have no students, and but a handful of scholars remaining, for that is all our modest lands will support. I hear that the scholarium in Laaryn has fared better. The others here in Variana are no more. About those elsewhere"-Charpentier shrugged-"I have not heard."

Quaeryt stood. "Thank you for seeing me. I am sorry to hear of your troubles."

"What will you do, Commander Scholar?"

"For now … I will report to Lord Bhayar. What he will do, I do not know, save I doubt that he will visit more tribulation upon the scholars or any scholarium that accepts his rule."

"What else would we do but accept what we cannot change?"

Quaeryt nodded once more, then took his leave of the old and tired building. Once outside, in the muddy space below the front steps, he mounted the mare, then gestured for the squad to ride out. At the foot of the low rise where the lane from the scholarium joined the road that was barely more than a path, he glanced back, his eyes taking in the sagging roofline of the old building and the wooden shutters that doubtless covered windows whose glass the scholars had been unable to replace.

What has happened to the scholars all across Lydar? Or is it that the rulers changed? Quaeryt wasn't certain that he knew. What was becoming increasingly clear was that he would receive little or no support or assistance from the scholars … and that he was likely better off without what they might offer. *Except that the scholars in Tilbor had refused to accept being impoverished … and that had created a different and more difficult situation.*

Both situations saddened him.

But that is why what you plan must come to be … must …

7

Solayi morning, Quaeryt and Vaelora slept late, if seventh glass could be considered late by any standards except that of the military-or by Bhayar, who seemed to rise glasses before anyone else. They had breakfast, and then Quaeryt headed out to meet with Zhelan to go over details of their departure on Lundi morning. Next came the session with the imager undercaptains, conducted in what had likely been a walled garden of the late High Holder Paitrak. First, Quaeryt received a report from Voltyr on the anomen repairs, indicating that such had been limited to strengthening the walls and repairing cracks in the masonry.

Then Quaeryt surveyed the eight remaining undercaptains before going on. "Because of various things, I have not had a chance to formally evaluate how each of you has progressed in terms of your imaging ability since before the battle of Variana." *And you should have, and now you're squeezing this testing in because you didn't get to it earlier.*

Zhelan and several rankers stood to Quaeryt's left, holding various weapons, as well as a large wooden bucket filled with smooth stones.

"Undercaptain Threkhyl … step forward."

The ginger-bearded Threkhyl did so, trying to conceal a smile.

"Your ability to create and move material is prodigious," Quaeryt began. "In the past, however, you have had difficulty in maintaining and holding personal shields…"

Threkhyl suddenly had no trouble maintaining an unsmiling expression.

"This could be a problem, since it renders you vulnerable to attack. So … I'd like you to raise whatever shield is appropriate." Quaeryt stepped forward and took the staff from the nearest ranker, then motioned for Threkhyl to move out onto the open ground. "You're to hold your shield as long as possible. If they fail or collapse, step back immediately. I'm only interested in your shields. You've already proven your courage in battle. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt squared his stance, holding the staff easily, with his own imaging shields almost against his skin in order to allow himself the ability to use the staff as freely as possible. Then he struck Threkhyl's shields, a blow not particularly hard, because he knew the undercaptain's shields could withstand almost anything-so long as Threkhyl could hold those shields.

The staff rebounded, and Quaeryt tried a thrust toward Threkhyl's

legs, then one directly at his chest, moving the staff in a blur, again because he knew the undercaptain had difficulty in maintaining a comprehensive shield and compensated by creating a smaller moving shield. As Quaeryt suspected, after almost a full quint, abruptly Threkhyl stepped back, his face bright red. He was panting heavily, and sweat streamed down his face.

"That's better, Threkhyl. When you practice, I'd like you to try a larger moving shield a bit farther from your body."

"Yes, sir." The burly undercaptain's raspy voice was just short of surly.

And that hasn't changed much, either, thought Quaeryt. "Undercaptain Voltyr … forward."

Voltyr stepped out and into the clear area Threkhyl had left, his gray eyes on Quaeryt.

Quaeryt motioned for the ranker with the bucket to join him. "I'm going to start throwing stones. I want you to image them out of existence as fast as you can." He began tossing stones, quickly, and Voltyr managed to image each one away, either elsewhere or into nothing.

Abruptly Quaeryt stopped. "Now … I want you to hold the strongest personal shields you can. While Major Zhelan pounds on them, I want you to continue imaging the stones away."

Voltyr nodded.

Zhelan stepped forward and took the staff. Quaeryt began tossing stones. He stopped after a quint. Voltyr was breathing hard, and sweating heavily, and his face was flushed, but his shields had held.

"Excellent." Quaeryt turned to Desyrk. "We'll start with the stones." He paused and looked at the bucket, then shook his head. "Major … could you have one of your men gather another bucket or two of stones that are roughly fist-sized?"

"Yes, sir." Zhelan smiled.

While one of the rankers hurried off, Quaeryt began throwing the stones for Desyrk. The undercaptain with the wavy blond hair destroyed a score before he missed one, then imaged away another, and missed the next.

"Take a few moments rest, Desyrk. Then I want you to try again, while holding the best shields that you can."

"Yes, sir."

By the time Quaeryt finished evaluating all the undercaptains, well after the first glass of the afternoon, he was sweating heavily despite the cool, almost chill, fall afternoon. More than a few muscles were aching and would doubtless remind him for the next few days that while his imaging skills had more than recovered, his physical endurance had not-and that lack of endurance and physical condition

would, in turn, limit the amount of imaging he could accomplish.

You need more exercise … much more.

All of the undercaptains had improved, although some, particularly Voltyr, Khalis, and Lhandor, had improved far more than had the others.

After Quaeryt had dismissed the undercaptains, Zhelan turned. "You're tired. Did you have to test each of them personally?"

"Who else would you suggest?" asked Quaeryt dryly. "Besides, I needed the exercise more than they did." He paused. "What did your rankers think?"

"Any rankers with sense have already decided that they don't want to be imagers." Zhelan added wryly, "I wouldn't wish your position for all the gold in Lord Bhayar's coffers."

Some of us don't have that choice. But Quaeryt laughed ruefully and said, "You're kind, Major, but I wouldn't want your position, either."

"Then it's good we each have what we do, sir."

They both smiled.

Because of the duration of the individual sessions with the undercaptains, and the need to wash up afterward, it wasn't that much before second glass when Quaeryt finally made his way to Skarpa's small study to wait for his subcommanders. Once inside the study, he sat down behind Skarpa's small table desk and took a deep breath.

It seemed as though only moments had passed before Khaern-the short and wiry subcommander with red hair shot liberally with gray-walked into the study with quick, not quite jerky, movements, his faded gray eyes taking in everything before settling on Quaeryt.

"Good afternoon, sir."

"Good afternoon. How are matters with the Eleventh Regiment?"

"We're set to head out, sir. Even managed to round up some more spare mounts, and a couple of extra tow mules for the supply flatboats. Grain's tight, but I've inquired and got the names of some grain factors in Eluthyn and Laaryn."

"You've been busy."

At that moment Alazyn entered. The junior subcommander was no taller than Khaern, but broader in the shoulders, and moved with an easy grace for all his muscularity, closing the door firmly, but so quietly that there was almost no sound. Under jet-black hair, his brown eyes took in everything without seeming to do so. "Good afternoon, Commander, Subcommander."

"Have a seat." Quaeryt gestured to the empty chair. "We were talking about arrangements for tomorrow and for moving along the Great Canal. I'd meant to ask you earlier, Alazyn, and I apologize for

not doing so, but do you have a company of engineers?"

"Yes, sir." Alazyn paused. "That is, I've got a company that's on the roster as engineers, and the captain, the undercaptain, and a couple of squad leaders know their trade. The rankers, well, there are a couple of journeyman carpenters, and a wheelwright that's barely more than an apprentice…"

When Alazyn had finished, Quaeryt nodded. "You've got more engineers than all Southern Army had. That's good, because Subcommander Khaern only has about a squad."

"Why are you worried about engineers, sir?"

"Because I have no idea what shape the Great Canal might be in once we get farther west … or what the water level is in the River Laar…"

All in all, Quaeryt spent close to a glass with the subcommanders, going over everything from the travel route, the supply situation, payroll details, even provisions for a farrier and spare horseshoes.

Then, at fourth glass, the three of them walked to the salon in the dwelling-or what had been the salon until much of the furnishings had been removed and replaced with a long table that had likely been used for dining-for a meeting of all the regimental commanders in Southern Army and those under Quaeryt's command.

Skarpa was waiting outside the door and beckoned to Quaeryt.

"Just go on in," Quaeryt told Alazyn and Khaern. As he stopped beside Skarpa, Alazyn and Khaern nodded and stepped through the doorway into the makeshift conference room.

"Not all the other subcommanders are here yet," added Skarpa. "Just Fhaen and Fhaasn, and Meinyt."

The one most junior and the two loyal to Skarpa. While that didn't surprise Quaeryt, it suggested certain … possibilities.

"Kharllon isn't here yet, either," added Skarpa in a low voice.

"He'll be the last, but barely."

"My thought as well."

Two subcommanders approached, hurrying down the hallway from the front hall. The first was graying, the second balding and blond. Both nodded to Quaeryt and Skarpa. "Good afternoon, Commander, Submarshal."

"Good afternoon, Dulaek, Paedn," replied Skarpa. "We'll be starting in a few moments."

No sooner had the pair entered the salon than the last two officers, who had to be Commander Kharllon and Subcommander Meurn, appeared from the rear of the building, walking at a steady, but not swift pace. Both nodded politely and said, "Good afternoon, Submarshal."

Quaeryt followed them into the salon, noting as he entered that

the head of the table had been left for Skarpa, and the chair to Skarpa's right for Quaeryt. Kharllon had taken the place to Skarpa's left, across from Quaeryt. Quaeryt did not sit, but remained standing as the other officers rose when Skarpa entered.

"As you were."

Quaeryt seated himself, taking a quick look at Kharllon, a clean-shaven, square-chinned man with short light brown hair shot lightly with silver, who looked to be perhaps ten years older than Quaeryt. Kharllon smiled warmly at Quaeryt, even with his pale blue eyes, and nodded. Quaeryt returned the nod and smile.

"Part of the purpose of this meeting is simply for all of you to see the other regimental commanders," began Skarpa. "Some of you already know each other, but most of you don't know Commander Quaeryt except by name, or Subcommander Khaern, Subcommander Alazyn, and Subcommander Fhaen, who is succeeding me as commander of Third Regiment. Several of you have not met Subcommander Meinyt." As he spoke each officer's name, Skarpa gestured toward the man. After his opening words, Skarpa outlined both the orders for Southern Army and those for Quaeryt and his forces, then gave the order of march for the morning, although Quaeryt knew that the submarshal had to have provided that to each officer individually already. "The regimental order will change daily, as I've discussed. Are there any questions or observations?" Skarpa looked toward Kharllon.

"Have you been given any indication how long this operation … is expected to take, sir?"

"Until we've accomplished what's necessary. Several months, if not longer. Commander Quaeryt will be operating independently once he and his forces leave Ephra, of course."

"I'm curious, sir," asked Meurn, "as to why seven regiments are necessary to deal with High Holders who have only a few hundred armsmen."

"Together they might mass more than a regiment. We'll also be stationed almost on the border with Antiago. Relations between Rex Kharst and the Autarch were never good. Those between Lord Bhayar and the Autarch have not been any better. Aliaro sent regiments against Southern Army on the march up the Aluse. Aliaro has attacked Ephra at least once already…"

"Will this operation be similar to what was required in Tilbor?" Meurn asked.

"Only in that we're likely to be dealing with rebel holders. The land is very different."

"Have you been there? Or has Commander Quaeryt?"

"Actually, I have been in both places," replied Quaeryt. "Tilbor is

far cooler, and the trees are mainly evergreens, with greater ease in riding through them, with limited undergrowth. In southern Bovaria and northern Antiago the forests are thicker, the air damper, and the undergrowth almost impassable." Quaeryt was exaggerating a bit, since he'd actually only spent a few weeks over several years in Antiago while his ship had been in port in both Kephria and Liantiago, but he didn't like the intent behind Meurn's questions.

After that, there were few questions, mainly those asking for honest clarifications, and a quint past fifth glass found Quaeryt walking back toward the estate house under a sky that was threatening rain-a cold rain, from the way the wind out of the northwest felt.

At least you don't have to worry about conducting services and giving homilies. Yet, even as he thought that, Quaeryt realized that, in a way, he missed those aspects of acting as a chorister-or at least he missed the thought behind creating the homilies.

He found Vaelora in the sitting room of their quarters, looking at two large kit bags and a pile of garments. With a grin, he started to open his mouth.

"Don't say a word, dearest. Not a word."

Quaeryt didn't. He retreated to the bedchamber with *Rholan and the Nameless,* the only volume in sight. He began to leaf through the pages. In light of Vaelora's terse command, he found one passage amusing, not that he would have dared to show or read it to her.

Men think women vain when they fret over their appearance and their clothing, and Rholan was little different. Any woman could have told him that what a man calls vanity in a woman is not undue worry over her appearance, but an attention to detail to assure that her personal presentation will enhance her power and control. Yet the men who belittle a woman's concern over her dress would think nothing amiss about fretting over who owes them as little as a copper or whether the cooper or the tanner or the wool factor treats them with proper respect. What is the difference? A woman's appearance is so often the measure of what small power she may have, and that power may be diminished if she fails to match or exceed in appearance and demeanor another woman. Many have noted that a man's power is measured by the respect he is accorded by others, and in the world in which women dwell, respect is seldom granted to women except in their appearance. As the son by blood, if not by inheritance or recognition, of a High Holder, Rholan was less than cognizant of this difference in how power is established, and that may explain in part why so many who followed him so faithfully were men …

There was something about the passage, though, that nagged at

him, and he was still pondering what it might be and why it bothered him when Vaelora indicated they should leave their quarters just before sixth glass. With only one of Vaelora's kit bags packed, Quaeryt refrained from any comment as he and Vaelora descended to the second level and the small family dining room, where Bhayar, alone, was already waiting.

"I did insist on game hens this evening," Bhayar said. "It will be a time before you'll have a chance for such delicacies."

"You're most thoughtful," replied Vaelora.

"I try, for if I did not, Aelina would discover it sooner or later."

As they seated themselves at the table, Quaeryt heard the pattering of raindrops against the dining room window and glanced briefly toward the ancient leaded panes.

"With luck," Bhayar said, "the rain will have passed before you depart in the morning." He took the carafe of white wine, filled Vaelora's goblet, then his own, and handed the carafe to Quaeryt. After Quaeryt filled his goblet, Bhayar raised his. "To a safe and successful journey."

Once they had finished drinking to the toast, one of the uniformed servers presented each of them with a bowl of a soup.

Vaelora tasted it first and nodded. "A pumpkin soup. It's particularly good for an evening like this. We haven't had that in years."

"Pumpkins don't grow well near Solis."

Vaelora nodded in return, then looked squarely at her brother. "I have my ideas, but what do you expect of me on this journey?"

"To be yourself, and to offer your best judgment to Quaeryt. I do not expect you to efface yourself when you deal with the Pharsi High Council. That is why I have named you both as my envoys in the documents you will carry."

Vaelora glanced at her husband.

"I haven't seen the documents."

"Did you think he was placating you, sister dear?" asked Bhayar.

"That thought had crossed my mind, foolish woman that I am."

Quaeryt winced.

Bhayar laughed softly. "Your husband would not placate you in something that important."

"Oh … does that mean I should not worry if he attempts to placate me?" Vaelora's smile was mischievous.

For her expression, if not her words, Quaeryt was grateful.

"I think, sister dear, I am most grateful for the man to whom you are wed." Before Vaelora could reply, Bhayar gestured toward the server who entered with three platters. "And also grateful for the arrival of the game hens."

“They’ll be far more tender than any fowl we’ll have for some time,” added Quaeryt quickly, “and better prepared.”

“Not if I supervise the cooking,” said Vaelora.

Quaeryt and Bhayar exchanged knowing glances, then busied themselves with the fare on their platters, which included lightly boiled fresh green beans with almonds, sage-herb rice, and an apricot glaze on the game hens.

After a time and several pleasantries, Bhayar cleared his throat. “The return from Khelgror may be far more dangerous than the journey there, especially if you are successful.”

“Because many would prefer that Telaryn be excessively occupied with Khel for years to come? Do you think Aliaro would actually send troops into Khel?” asked Quaeryt.

“Troops?” Bhayar shrugged. “I’d wager against it, but I wouldn’t put it past him. I wouldn’t put anything past him, even secretly supplying elveweed to Skarpa’s troopers.”

Quaeryt sensed the undercurrent in Bhayar’s words, not that such was surprising, given the way Aliaro had treated Bhayar and Vaelora’s sister Chaerila, and how he had dismissed her very existence after her death in a childbirth that had been fatal to her and the infant.

“I do want you both to take care.” Bhayar looked from Quaeryt to Vaelora. “And since neither of you takes enough care of yourself … Vaelora, try to keep him from doing too much. And you, Quaeryt, keep reminding her that she is with child, and that, even if she can do something, she needs to think about whether she should now that she has to worry about more than herself.” Bhayar laughed. “I’ve said my piece. I have my doubts that either of you will fully heed my words … but try.”

The wry irony of his words brought smiles to the faces of both Quaeryt and Vaelora.

“Oh … there’s one other matter,” said Bhayar. “I said I’d have the funds for you for the expedition. Skarpa will have the pay chests for all the men, including your regiments, and the golds for food and supplies until you reach Ephra. You can’t be commandeering food and lodging in Khel-unless and after they refuse terms, and even that wouldn’t be good. So, along with the documents naming you envoys, I’ll have three hundred golds for you in the morning. Make it last as long as you can.”

“I definitely will,” promised Quaeryt.

The dessert was an apple tart with a flaky crust just a shade overcooked, Quaeryt thought, both from tasting it and seeing the brief frown from Vaelora after her first bite. Still, he thought it tasty and far better than what they would be eating in the weeks ahead.

Later, after they had sipped brandy with Bhayar and then parted,

neither Quaeryt nor Vaelora said anything as they climbed the steps to their tower quarters and then made their way into the small sitting room. Vaelora settled into one of the ancient armchairs. Quaeryt did not, walking to the window and then back toward his wife.

"You're pacing," Vaelora said quietly.

"Your brother's never expressed that much concern before."

"That worries me," Vaelora replied.

"He's worried. I don't think he wants to send us, but the last thing he wants is to fight in Khel. If the High Council refuses his terms, he'll either have to fight or resign himself to an independent Khel … and that will lead to battles that he or Clayar will have to fight later."

"Can't we use that point with the Pharsi leaders?"

"What point?"

"If they agree to his terms, there won't be any more wars and deaths, and right now, Bhayar is inclined to be more generous."

"We can certainly try." Quaeryt could see Vaelora's eyes narrowing. "I know. Merely trying isn't enough. We have to make it work, some way or another. I just hope whatever way it is doesn't turn out to be too bloody."

"We'll have to see that it doesn't, dearest, won't we?"

Quaeryt nodded, wondering, not for anywhere close to the first time, just how he and Vaelora could do that.

8

Well before seventh glass on Lundi morning, Quaeryt, Vaelora, and first company left the hold house where Quaeryt had spent more than a month, and began the short ride of a half mille south of the hold-and two milles or so north of the Chateau Regis-to the piers serving both the River Aluse and the Great Canal.

The sky held high thin gray clouds, and the road was muddy, but not excessively so. Quaeryt could only hope that all the mounts and marchers of the regiments would not turn the canal towpath into slop, although it appeared well packed and graveled. The two kit bags containing Vaelora's garments were bulging, and Quaeryt avoided even looking close to where they were strapped behind Vaelora's saddle.

"What can you tell me about the canal boat?" asked Vaelora as they turned on to what passed for a main road.

"Well … the squad leader who's been caring for it said that it was fancy and clean. It's not leaking, and all the fittings look to be sound."

"Dearest…"

"It's some twenty yards long, and barely five wide, and there is a small galley, a salon, and a small sleeping cabin. The crew quarters are cramped."

"You're not saying much, dearest. How is it furnished? How large is the bed? Is there a wash chamber?"

"The furnishings are adequate, and the bed is wide enough for two. There is a small space barely a yard square in the corner of the bedchamber for bathing."

Had Vaelora's glance at Quaeryt been a quarrel, he would have perished on the spot. Instead, he grinned. "My dear … it matters little, since the accommodations are what we have and are far better than most we have endured in past travels." He paused just slightly before adding, "But they look to be quite comfortable. I did make sure that there were enough quilts and blankets."

"I'm sure *you* will need them." Vaelora sniffed.

Two quints later, Quaeryt and Vaelora rode past the squad serving as the vanguard and reined up at the lower pier where the canal boat was tied up.

"It's gorgeous." Vaelora looked at Quaeryt accusingly.

The canal boat was indeed striking, with a well-oiled and glistening oak hull and superstructure. The main cabin structure occupied fifteen yards, perhaps slightly more, with the flat roof of the cabin rising less than two yards above what would have been the main deck, if the forward deck had extended from stem to stern. The

short front crew deck extended less than three yards from the rounded bow to where the main cabin began, and the steering deck aft of the cabin was closer to a yard and a half in length.

Quaeryt dismounted, handing the mare's reins to one of the rankers, and then stepped back to Vaelora's mount, holding out a hand for her to dismount. "Lord Bhayar's orders," he said solemnly, before grinning.

Vaelora shook her head in a short gesture, but she did take Quaeryt's hand as she dismounted.

Quaeryt escorted her to their transportation and quarters for the next weeks. On the starboard side of the canal boat, some seven yards aft of the stem, was a set of narrow doors, swung open to reveal a set of steps down into the main cabin. At the bottom of the steps, to the right, or forward, was another narrow pocket door, leading into the cabin that was the bedchamber.

Vaelora moved carefully down the narrow steps and into the sleeping cabin, taking in the paneled walls and the built-in bed, with the headboard against the bulkhead set between the two narrow and angled windows. Beneath the windows were built-in cabinets.

"For travel, this is well appointed," Vaelora said. "There's little space for clothing, though."

"There are large drawers under the bed," replied Quaeryt. *They likely won't hold everything you brought, though.* "Let's move into the salon, so the rankers can carry our gear into the sleeping cabin." He stepped back out of the smaller cabin, almost tripping as the boot heel of his bad left leg caught the edge of the bottom step. He caught himself smoothly and pivoted into the salon.

The salon was paneled in goldenwood, and had wide windows that could be blocked by folding shutters, but those windows only began at what would have been the deck level. A small writing desk stood in the starboard aft corner, with a lamp on a brass mount above it. A space slightly starboard of the middle of the salon was occupied by a narrow oblong goldenwood table with chairs for eight, clearly more for officials or officers to meet than for regular dining. In the forward port corner was a comfortable armchair, with a pair of lamps above it. A second armchair was set next to and aft of the first.

"Everything's aboard, sir," announced the squad leader from the salon entry.

"If you'd tell Major Zhelan to give the word to the boatman to get under way."

"Yes, sir."

As the squad leader vaulted up the steps, Vaelora turned to Quaeryt. "What will you do now?"

"Sit with you and watch the canal go by for half a glass-until we

join up with Skarpa and the regiments.”

9

The next four days were uneventful, with cool but not immoderate weather, and no rain and no problems with the canal or the towpath. Quaeryt had just dressed and finished eating an overcooked cheese omelet and bread with bitter peach preserves on Vendrei morning, perhaps two quints before the army and the canal boat were due to head out, when someone rapped on the side door of the boat.

"That doesn't sound good." Across from him at the narrow table in the salon, Vaelora lowered her mug of tea, tea that was lukewarm at best, Quaeryt knew.

He just shook his head, stood and walked across the salon and up the narrow steps, then pushed open the doors and stepped out onto the stone coping on the top of the canal wall. The vertical gap between the boat deck and the coping seemed larger than the night before.

Zhelan stood waiting. "I'm sorry to bother you, sir. The submarshal's scouts have reported a breach in the canal some five milles ahead. The canal's dry there, and the boats from the west are all backed up at the next locks. Those are at Eluthyn…"

Quaeryt nodded, then glanced at the hazy early morning sky. He saw no sign of rain. He looked to the west and the water level in the canal in front of the boat. While it was lower, the canal was not empty. Still, if they couldn't fix the breach, he supposed that they didn't have to take the canal boat to get to Khelgror. He'd rather not do that, because Vaelora would have to ride a great deal more, especially on the way back.

"The local canalman managed to close one of the emergency gates near the east end of the breach," Zhelan went on, "and the lock at Eluthyn keeps the water from there from draining, but there are more than twenty boats lined up to the west, bringing harvest grain to Variana. Submarshal Skarpa says that all the boats on the canal will be stopped before long."

Quaeryt took a deep breath. "That's all we need … people short of bread just at the beginning of winter." *And Bhayar won't be happy if he finds out you didn't solve the problem.* "Are the imagers ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like to bring Alazyn's engineer as well. He might be able to help in telling us how best we can repair the breach. How did it happen?"

"Heavy rains four days ago, the canalman said, but the berm side of the canal didn't give way until yesterday."

"I can be with you in a quint or so."

"You don't need to hurry that much, sir. It'll take longer than that before everyone's ready to mount up."

Quaeryt had another thought, one he should have had first. "I'll need to meet with the submarshal before we head out."

"I thought you might, sir. He said he'd be here in a few moments."

Quaeryt didn't have to wait long for the submarshal. Skarpa arrived within moments of the time that Zhelan had left to inform the undercaptains and engineers.

"You know I'd hoped we could reach Eluthyn by last night," began Skarpa.

"I know, but it was better to stop than settling nine regiments on the town in darkness."

Skarpa cleared his throat. "With all the delay … it might be best to march ahead today to Eluthyn. It's only seven miles. That way we'd have more time to arrange for supplies and quarters. It would also give the mounts and men at least a day's rest…"

Quaeryt grinned. "You scarcely need my approval for that. Except you're suggesting that Eleventh and Nineteenth Regiments accompany Southern Army as well."

"It would rest them more as well."

"By all means. First company and Vaelora and I will have to stay with the boats, though, and I'll need the imager undercaptains and the engineers to deal with the breach in the canal."

"I'm not comfortable with just one company. I'd thought to have two companies from my forces remain here as well."

Almost half a glass passed before Quaeryt, the imagers, first company, and Captain Neusyn from the Nineteenth Regiment engineers rode west, leaving the regiments, the canal boats-and Vaelora-temporarily behind.

It was well past eighth glass when Quaeryt and Neusyn reined up and dismounted on the towpath on the north side of the empty canal, a good five hundred yards east of the leaking emergency water gates, and several hundred yards from the nearest canal post building.

Quaeryt looked at the south side of the canal, the so-called berm side, where the stone walls were backed by the spoil dug from the canal itself. The stone blocks had collapsed into a rough heap. He turned to Captain Neusyn. "Didn't something besides rain have to cause this?"

"Almost looks like someone blasted the underburden away, so that the water leached out and eroded the support under the lowest course of stones until they collapsed." Neusyn frowned. "But that … I need to look at it more closely."

Quaeryt looked skeptically at the muddy bottom of the canal.

"Better to cross through the mud," said Neusyn. "I wouldn't want to walk across that emergency gate." He gestured vaguely with the iron-tipped staff he carried. "It's barely holding, and if it goes, the water will widen the breach and drain more of the canal."

Quaeryt could see that, but he didn't like it. He and the engineer had to walk almost a hundred yards farther west until they reached a set of stone steps that allowed a short jump down to the mud of the canal bottom. Quaeryt's boots sank into the mud not quite to midcalf, and dark globs of mud sprayed up onto his trousers. He wasn't terribly happy as he made his way through the mud after the engineer, trying not to spray more of the smelly mud on himself.

Once Neusyn reached the far side of the canal, he stopped short of the hole in the bottom of the canal that extended to the south and all the way through where the stone walls and the stone and earth berm beyond had been. There, only a long pile of cut stones lay toppled and half buried in muck and mud. After studying the toppled stones for several moments, the engineer captain walked around the stones, prodding them and the area around them with the iron-tipped staff. He shook his head as the staff revealed a length of bone, then another.

"The stories were true, it would seem," said Quaeryt. "That looks like a human bone."

"There are others over there at the other side of the gap … just short of where the wall is sagging," said Neusyn.

Quaeryt looked in the direction the staff pointed. He couldn't be certain, but he thought there were enough bones there to account for several bodies.

"The clay preserved them for a time," added the engineer. "But bad engineering tells in the end."

"What was so bad about it?" asked Quaeryt.

"Do you see these white chalky flakes and grains?"

The white fragments that Neusyn pointed out obviously meant something, but what that might be Quaeryt had no idea. So he just nodded.

"They're gypsum."

That didn't explain any more to Quaeryt. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"It dissolves when there's a lot of water around it. When they built the canal, after they laid the stone walls and mortared the stones in place, they sealed the bottom of the canal itself with clay. That's usually enough to keep seepage to a minimum, but if anything happens…"

"The rain couldn't have done that in a few days, then?"

"No. It's been sinking for years. You can see the way the canal

walls have sunk. Might have been the runoff from the berm funneled down there, or maybe even rodent holes…"

Quaeryt looked at the stone courses. From what he could see, the stones had sagged in various ways for more than fifty yards on each side of the gap in the wall and berm.

"… wouldn't be that obvious with water in the canal, but now…"

"So … what will it take to put it right?" asked Quaeryt.

"The footings under the stone courses need to be replaced, with solid stone, if we can find any. The part of the canal bottom that's been eroded needs to be replaced with solid fill, with at least half a yard of good clay on the top, and then the stones reset and mortared. A good half yard of clay on the outside of the south wall, and the same on the bottom of the canal where it's been washed away. Stone rip-rap or backing on the outside before the berm is replaced…"

"All right. Let's go back. You explain that carefully to the imagers, and we'll get to work."

"Can they…?"

"That's what they're here for. This can't be any harder than what they've done before, and they'll be doing it without having an enemy attack them while they're working."

As the two waded through the mud to the north side of the canal and then climbed up to the towpath, Quaeryt couldn't help but think about the bodies buried under the walls. *But you've killed far more men than this canal did … and for what?* He didn't have an answer to his own question … only a hope that the deaths might lead to a more peaceful and united Lydar. *Does that hope justify what you've done?*

Quaeryt pushed those questions into the back of his mind and gathered the undercaptains, listening as the engineer had explained what was necessary.

Then Quaeryt turned to the imagers. "Horan … image those stones in the breach, the pile of muddy ones in that hole in the bottom of the canal, onto the berm. That's the flat raised part beyond the wall. Put the stones, say, fifty yards west of the westernmost part of the breach."

"Yes, sir."

Once those stones had been moved, Quaeryt turned to Desyrk. "If you would begin to image away the muck in the breach, in small amounts so that no load tires you too much."

Desyrk nodded, then began to concentrate. Bit by bit, the muck began to vanish. After less than a quint, the first riders of the Southern Army began to ride past, along the towpath and the ground to the north of the canal.

After a quint Quaeryt said, "You stop for now. Smaethyl, you take over with the muck."

As he could, Quaeryt alternated between imagers, but it was past the first glass of the afternoon before they finished cleaning out the breach. By then Skarpa's forces and Quaeryt's two regiments had all passed and were, Quaeryt hoped, settling into Eluthyn.

When he was satisfied with the cleanup and removal, Quaeryt summoned the engineer.

Neusyn looked at the gaping gash where, two glasses before, there had been a breach, uneven courses of stone, toppled stones and muck. "That would have taken at least several days with all my men."

"Imagers do offer some advantages." Quaeryt glanced over at the undercaptains, all of them sweating somewhat despite the cool breeze out of the northwest, then at the gash. After several moments, he turned to the engineer. "You need a stone footing, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"It should run from one end to the other, but how high should the stone be?"

"About a digit below the bottom of the lowest course of the stonework on each side."

Quaeryt studied the gash, and the hundred or so yards between the undamaged canal walls, thinking. Then, he reached out into the lands to the south of the canal, lands he hoped had been warmed by the weak autumn sun during the morning. Carefully, he visualized a smooth stone footing, filling the lower trench, and stretching from one wall to the other.

A flash of light and a wave of chill swept over the group, and a slight feeling of dizziness struck Quaeryt … and passed. He looked across the empty canal at the smooth expanse of gray stone, then at the sparkling ice and frost stretching southward across the stubbled fields beyond the canal for close to half a mille. After taking a deep breath, he said to Neusyn, "That will have to warm up, I think, before the others begin to image the walls back in place."

The captain swallowed. "As you say, Commander."

Quaeryt looked to the undercaptains. "We all need a break, and some rations, before we go back to work on the walls."

In the later part of the afternoon, after a break of nearly a glass, Quaeryt directed the undercaptains in their imaging to replace the stonework, then the clay, and finally the berm. They did not finish until well after fourth glass. While they made ready to return to the regiments, Quaeryt and Neusyn walked the several hundred yards to the small canal house. The weathered canalman was standing outside, waiting.

"The repairs are finished," Quaeryt said.

"Sir … never seen anything like that," said the weathered canalman, looking westward at the stonework, then back at the

commander.

"It's not something imagers usually do," replied Quaeryt, "but Lord Bhayar needs the Great Canal in working order. I don't think you should open the locks and emergency water gates for another glass or so." Quaeryt was being cautious, but he couldn't help but worry that some of the material might be chill and should warm before coming in contact with water.

"Whatever you say, sir."

Quaeryt nodded, then headed over to where the mare and the undercaptains were mounting up.

On the ride back to the canal boats and first company, Quaeryt took some time imaging the dried mud off his trousers, but being careful not to image away any of the fabric. When he finished, he realized that he was tired, but only physically so, and that he was having no trouble with his shields. That was good, especially after imaging a massive section of stone into place.

"Well?" said Vaelora when Quaeryt returned. She wrinkled her nose. "What…?"

"Canal mud. It's not exactly perfume. I imaged away the worst of it."

"How bad was it?"

"One of Kharst's engineers cut corners…" He went on to explain what had happened and what he and the other imagers had been forced to do, then finished, "It will likely be tomorrow afternoon before the springs refill this section of the canal, and we'll have to wait until at least some of the cargo boats-"

"Why do we have to wait?"

"Because they're all jammed up at the locks in Eluthyn. We couldn't get through until they've moved." Before Vaelora could say more, he went on. "Since we're going to be here for another day, we might as well visit Eluthyn tomorrow. The locals should be getting used to a Telaryn force of some size by now. There might even be an inn with decent fare." He paused. "I do think that the accommodations here are likely to be better than in the town."

"In that, dearest, I would agree, but it would be nice to see more than water and canal walls and fields and small towns."

"We can manage that."

Vaelora smiled.

10

Quaeryt woke up with a start, lying on his back. He could not move, except to breathe, and his breath was a thin white cloud above him that crystallized into fine needles of ice that stabbed at the flesh of his face as they solidified and fell. The chill seeped over him like ice water, but without any sense of wetness as it bit into his exposed flesh.

Standing in the ice mist facing him were white figures, assemblages of bones, angular skeletons. The sightless eyeholes of the skulls looked at him, accusingly. As he lay there, Quaeryt became aware that standing on each side of where he lay were men in the blue-gray uniforms of Bovaria. Each Bovarian trooper was coated in ice, and each stared down at him, as if to demand a reason why he stood there, frozen and immobile.

"No…" Quaeryt could barely choke out the words. "No…"

Then … the skeletons and the ice-covered troopers faded away, and Quaeryt lay in the icy sheets of the wide bed in the canal boat's sleeping chamber, with Vaelora's arms and warmth around him.

"Dearest … dearest…"

"I'm here," mumbled Quaeryt.

"The windows … They're coated with ice." Vaelora wrapped her arms even more tightly around Quaeryt. "Another terrible dream, dearest?"

"I was frozen in ice … again. This time … there were skeletons, bones of ice, and they were all looking at me."

"Bones, skeletons?"

"Yesterday, when we repaired the canal, we discovered bones, bones of the workers who died building it and who were buried under the walls and the bottom of the canal."

"You didn't say anything about that last night."

"No," he admitted. "I didn't want to think about it."

"You didn't have anything to do with them."

"No … but I couldn't help thinking about how they died for a purpose. Have the thousands I've killed, more than those Kharst and his sire killed in building the canal, died for any real purpose?"

"You can't think that way, dearest. You can't."

"I keep telling myself that. I keep saying I've had to do what I've done, but sometimes I'm not very good at persuading my dreams to consider things that way." Quaeryt shivered.

"Thousands would have died if you hadn't done what you did. In the end, it might have gone the other way, and thousands more in Telaryn might have died. Bhayar is far more merciful than Kharst ever

was. Neither he nor Father nor Grandsire killed thousands to build canals. They didn't employ assassins to kill uncooperative High Holders."

Quaeryt sat up slowly, looking around the sleeping cabin. The frost that had coated the inside of the shutters and the paneled walls was beginning to melt, but the air was still far cooler than it should have been, even in late fall. "Are you all right?"

"Me? I'm fine." She paused. "Are you?"

"I will be … thanks to you." He turned and put his arms around her.

Somewhat later, after Quaeryt had stopped shivering and both were dressed, they sat across from each other at the narrow table in the salon, sipping tea and finishing the remnants of egg toast drizzled with an apple-berry syrup.

"I wonder how Skarpa is doing in finding supplies in Eluthyn," mused Quaeryt.

"He won't be having that much difficulty. It would be rather hard for factors to deny someone with nine regiments." She paused. "Didn't you get a message while I was dressing?"

"I did. It just said that he had established quarters in the north of Eluthyn and that the town was calm. The factors wouldn't cause problems, but purchasing their supplies could be hard on the town if there aren't High Holders with supplies. I should have mentioned that. Then…"

"Then what?"

"Purchasing supplies from either holders or factors will drive the costs of goods up here, no matter how it's done."

"There are costs to war that no ruler can pay." Vaelora smiled. "I have no doubts Submarshal Skarpa will have done what he can, dearest. If he hasn't, you can always go to the High Holders. You have a way with them."

Quaeryt made a sour face. "Just another form of coercion."

"All power is a form of coercion," she pointed out.

"It is," he agreed, "but the problem is that you can't get much done without power, and the less power you use, in whatever form, the longer it takes to get things done. The more you use, the more likely people are going to get hurt or killed."

"Sometimes, using more quickly hurts fewer people than not acting." She looked at him. "A man who doesn't act can claim he didn't do anything to hurt people, but what happens if more people die because he doesn't want blood on his hands?"

"I understand that argument all too well, dear. It's why I have nightmares."

"No … you have nightmares because you understand the costs of

power. Those who don't sleep soundly. You've often wondered why Bhayar is up so early every day. It's because he worries himself awake."

Quaeryt hadn't even considered that, he had to admit.

"Now … dearest … shall we prepare to ride to Eluthyn?"

By way of an answer, Quaeryt stood and extended his hand to Vaelora.

Two quints later, as they rode westward on the towpath, escorted by first squad from first company, Quaeryt looked at the canal water level, which seemed to be almost as high as it had been before the breach-until they reached the closed water gate. While water was filling the space between the easternmost lock and the water gate, it was less than a yard deep, needing another yard before it reached a level equal with that behind the emergency water gate to the east.

Before long, they began to ride past more and more cots set in the fields, both to the north and the south of the canal, and then the towpath was bordered by warehouses and factorages, stretching for the several hundred yards leading to the first lock just east of where the canal crossed the Phraan River. The water level remained about a yard deep, and most of the canal boats tied to the bollards on the canal wall tilted slightly one way or the other, indicating that the water had not yet risen enough to lift them off the bottom of the canal.

They rode up the ramps beside the two locks, both empty of boats, and then to where the canal crossed the Phraan River. The river was narrower than even the canal, and Kharst's engineers had resolved the problem of crossing the river simply. They'd just created a stone culvert under the canal, so that where the canal crossed the river, it was effectively a stone tube above the culvert.

To the west of the river, the canal widened to almost twenty yards across for close to half a mille, and canal boats were tied end to end and two deep for most of that distance. A hundred yards ahead, a large stone plaza extended north from the canal towpath, and beyond it a wide paved boulevard, the first paved street or road Quaeryt had seen since leaving Variana. He gestured to the squad leader and Vaelora, then turned the mare north and led the others across the plaza. Because it was Samedi, a market day, there were carts and stalls and vendors set up all around the plaza. Quaeryt also noted more than a few men in the garb of boatmen, but that was to be expected, given that Eluthyn was a stop on the canal and that more than the normal number of canal boats were tied up because of the breach in the canal.

More than a few people glanced at the uniformed riders, particularly those closer to the center of the plaza as they edged back from the armed troopers, but most soon looked away once it was clear

that the riders were passing through the plaza.

"They don't seem terribly worried," said Vaelora quietly.

"Most likely because of the way Skarpa handled things." Quaeryt's words were supported by the fact that he saw no Telaryn patrols riding the boulevard. If the people in Eluthyn had accepted Bhayar's rule, patrols were not called for unless there were disturbances.

Beyond the plaza the boulevard gradually narrowed, although there remained enough space for several wagons abreast. The shops and crafting establishments that stood back of the wide stone sidewalks were modest, but well kept. Quaeryt noticed two coppersmiths in the space of a long block, as well as a silversmith.

"You! The Telaryn officer!"

Quaeryt turned and reined up the mare, gesturing for the squad to halt. Then he rode over to a gray stone building on the east side of the boulevard, roofed with gray slate, old enough that the slate tiles were green with moss in places. There on the limestone steps stood a heavyset man in a stylish gray coat and matching trousers.

"You had a question?" asked Quaeryt, looking at the older man, who was likely half a head taller than Quaeryt himself.

"What are you doing here? You and all the other Telaryn troops? The war's over, isn't it? We agreed to accept your lord's rule."

"You haven't heard?" asked Quaeryt mildly. "Although Lord Bhayar defeated Rex Kharst at Variana over a month ago, not all parts of Bovaria have been as agreeable as you have. As for why we're here, we're in the vanguard of the Southern Army headed for Ephra. Some regiments will be posted there to watch Autarch Aliaro's forces. Some others will be heading to the lands that were once Khel, since they have not yet agreed to Lord Bhayar's terms. The troopers here will not remain long, most likely only another day … unless there are severe storms." Quaeryt smiled politely. "Might I ask your name, sir?"

"My name is mine, not yours."

Quaeryt refrained from sighing. While image-projecting both absolute authority and well-meaning friendliness, he spoke again. "I certainly mean you no harm, sir, but as an officer of Lord Bhayar, I cannot accept the way in which you replied. So I will offer my name and ask once more for yours. I am Commander Quaeryt Rytersyn, in command of the Eleventh and Nineteenth Regiments. You are?"

The large man paled slightly, then swallowed. "Grekial D'Factorius, Commander."

"Thank you. I wish you well, Factor Grekial. Good day." With a nod Quaeryt turned the mare and rode back to where he rejoined Vaelora.

"You were powerfully mannered, dearest," she murmured.

"I wish I had not been required to do so."

"He will remember both your power and your forbearance."

Quaeryt certainly hoped so.

After several blocks the shops gave way to two-story dwellings, and then to those of one story, and before long they were nearing what looked to be the northern end of Eluthyn proper. Ahead was a squad of Telaryn troopers, heading southward, with an undercaptain in the lead.

"Commander! Sir!" The undercaptain rode forward and reined up as Quaeryt signaled his own troopers to a halt.

"Yes, Undercaptain?"

"We just left the submarshal, sir, with a dispatch for you." The officer handed a folded and sealed paper to Quaeryt.

Quaeryt broke the seal and read the message.

Commander-

We have availed ourselves of the generosity of High Holder Cleotyr.

He has hopes that he might make your acquaintance and that of Lady Vaelora … if such is possible.

Underneath the brief lines was Skarpa's signature.

Quaeryt handed the missive to Vaelora, who read it and handed it back.

"Lead on, Undercaptain," said Quaeryt.

"Yes, sir!" The undercaptain turned his mount, and called out orders to his squad, his voice enthusiastically cheerful. "To the rear, ride!"

"He is most cheerful," observed Vaelora, easing her mount closer to Quaeryt's mare, so much that their boots nearly brushed.

"Of course. We saved him a ride of more than ten milles, and he can report success."

"I'm not dressed for calling on High Holders."

"We don't need to ride seven milles back and then another seven milles to return here," he pointed out reasonably.

"I'm only wearing good riding clothes," murmured Vaelora.

"What else would you be wearing for riding?" he replied, adding in a voice below a whisper, "That kind of riding, anyway."

"Dearest…"

Quaeryt did not wince at the icily exasperated tone, but he did manage to grin.

"You are impossible."

"That is quite likely, as you well know."

Ahead of them, a trooper galloped away, heading northward along the road that had become merely packed clay beyond the edges of Eluthyn.

No doubt to tell Skarpa that we're on our way. Quaeryt glanced

toward Vaelora.

She looked straight ahead, clearly refusing to look in his direction, although he thought he detected the faintest hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

After riding another mille or so, the undercaptain and his squad rode through a set of gates guarded by a squad of foot troopers. Quaeryt and Vaelora and their troopers followed.

The graveled drive that led from the dull red-brick entry gates with their black iron grillwork toward the hold house curved through gently rising grounds that were largely meadows, although Quaeryt wasn't totally sure about that because much of the grass had been flattened, either by winds or late and heavy rain. Several hundred yards back from the drive on each side rose tall trees, mainly oaks, set in what was clearly parkland, for there was little undergrowth.

Nearly half a mille up the drive was the hold house, a moderately sprawling two-story structure constructed largely of the same dull red brick as the gates, with limestone cornices, arches, and window ledges.

Skarpa was standing in the midday shade under the small covered portico.

"I had hoped you might appear," he offered, looking to Vaelora and adding, "and especially you, Lady Vaelora."

"How could we not?" replied Vaelora brightly.

Quaeryt merely nodded as he dismounted and handed the mare's reins to the nearest ranker, before moving to offer a hand to Vaelora in dismounting. As usual, she needed no assistance, but took his hand, if putting no weight at all on it while alighting on the lowest step of the brick and stone steps up to the main entry.

"High Holder Cleotyr and his wife are most hopeful that you will accept their hospitality for midday refreshments," Skarpa added.

"We would be delighted," announced Vaelora, "although we are dressed for riding." She did not glance sideways at Quaeryt, although he felt that she did.

"I am quite certain that they understand you are traveling, Lady. I assure you that you look beautiful."

"You are most kind."

"No. I'm honest. Your husband knows that."

Quaeryt grinned. "I told her that she was beautiful in riding clothes. She didn't believe me."

"She should. You're too honest for your own good, Quaeryt." With that, Skarpa turned and led them up the low steps to the entry doors, opened by a footman in maroon livery.

Waiting in the square receiving hall beyond the entry foyer were a man and a woman. The man was likely five or six years older than

Quaeryt, and his wife close to the High Holder's age. Both immediately inclined their heads as Skarpa, Quaeryt, and Vaelora halted.

"High Holder Cleotyr, Lady Cleonie, might I present Commander Quaeryt and his wife Lady Vaelora? She is the sister of Lord Bhayar, as you may recall."

The faintest look of puzzlement crossed the face of the ample High Holder as he looked at Vaelora, but his eyes widened as he beheld Quaeryt, especially after he had removed his visor cap and tendered it to the footman.

By comparison, his petite wife smiled warmly and stepped forward immediately, inclining her head. "Lady Vaelora, you and your husband grace us with your presence."

"We are pleased to be here, and you are most kind to receive us with so little notice," replied Vaelora.

"It is not kindness, but what you are due," added Cleotyr. "Come … we should retire to the salon while refreshments are made ready." He stepped aside and gestured toward the larger of the three corridors leading from the receiving hall, the one that led straight back.

Lady Cleonie and Vaelora led the way, followed by the three men, to an oblong chamber with large square windows set waist high in paneled light oak walls and comprised of leaded panes that looked to be even older than those in the hold house of the late High Holder Paitrak. Cleonie settled herself on a loveseat upholstered in a green velvet, a velvet that had seen its youth before Quaeryt was born, he suspected. Vaelora sat beside her.

Cleotyr did not sit, but moved to a carved oak sideboard and turned. "I can offer you a lovely white wine, an exuberant red, or some of the best amber lager in Bovaria."

"The white, if you please," said Vaelora.

"I must say that I'd prefer the best amber lager in Bovaria. Good lager is even harder to find than outstanding vintages," noted Quaeryt.

"Ah … a man after my own heart."

"The lager, if you would," added Skarpa.

Cleotyr nodded to the footman who stood at the end of the sideboard, then gestured to the wooden chairs, with seats and backs upholstered in the green velvet, set in a semicircle, with a low table midway between the loveseat and the chairs.

Quaeryt took the chair across from Cleonie, Skarpa the one facing Vaelora, and the High Holder the one between them.

"Quite a surprise to have such distinguished personages appearing without notice here in Eluthyn," offered the burly Cleotyr, shifting his weight in the chair and glancing toward Skarpa. "We have not seen such in many years."

In turn, Skarpa looked to Quaeryt.

"Many things may occur without notice for some time to come," said Quaeryt. "Lord Bhayar has no wish to unsettle the High Holders, factors, and people any more than necessary, but he also will make changes, and some of those changes may come with brief notice."

"What kind of changes might those be?" Cleotyr's voice was pleasant, but held an undertone.

"There are always changes when those in power change," replied Quaeryt. "Some will happen just because Lord Bhayar is in power. I suspect that merchants along the River Aluse will find it easier and less costly to use the river ports in the cities of old Telaryn, for example, and traders and merchants will find more places to sell goods now that Telaryn and Bovaria are no longer enemies."

"And do you anticipate changes in the laws of the land?"

"There will doubtless be some. Lord Bhayar would not wish to have to administer one set of laws in one place, and another somewhere else. How those changes to a more consistent set of laws will be made … that I could not tell you, since I doubt Lord Bhayar has yet had the chance to consider the matter beyond the fact that some changes along those lines will be necessary."

"Such speculation right now would be useless," added Skarpa firmly.

Cleotyr turned as the footman appeared with a tray on which were set three beakers of lager and two goblets of white wine. "Ah … you must tell me what you think of the lager."

Vaelora received her wine first, then Cleonie, with the lagers going to Skarpa, Quaeryt, and Cleotyr in turn. Quaeryt was careful to take the crystal beaker in his right hand, since he still had no real control of the two fingers on his left.

Once everyone had a beverage, Vaelora lifted her goblet. "Our thanks and appreciation for your gracious hospitality."

"It is more than our pleasure," replied Cleonie, also lifting her glass.

When they had all sipped, Vaelora said, "As you said, this is a lovely white wine."

"And the lager is indeed one of the best I've tasted," added Quaeryt.

"I agree with Commander Quaeryt," said Skarpa, "and we've tasted lager all the way across Lydar."

"You're most kind," replied Cleotyr.

"Truthful," said Skarpa.

After a slight moment of silence, Cleonie again spoke, looking to Quaeryt. "I could not but notice that your uniform differs slightly from those of other officers, Commander. I know little of such, and I beg

your indulgence for my ignorance."

Quaeryt smiled, managing to conceal his amusement at the manner in which she had offered the question to obtain an answer most likely desired by her husband. "It is not a matter of ignorance. You are most observant to note that the shade and color of my uniform differ somewhat from those of other officers. The color reflects my background as a scholar."

"And as an imager," added Skarpa.

High Holder Cleotyr moistened his lips. "There was mention of an imager commander…"

"Yes, there was," replied Skarpa. "Commander Quaeryt has been most effective. Now he is on his way to Khelgror. Lord Bhayar named him and Lady Vaelora as his envoys. Southern Army is accompanying his forces as far as Ephra."

"Again," interjected Cleonie sweetly, "I fear I lack the knowledge to understand these military matters as I should. But … if Commander Quaeryt is so accomplished … and he is married to the sister of Lord Bhayar…" She let the words trail off with a puzzled expression.

Quaeryt wanted to laugh. He did not. "I did not plan to be an officer. I was a scholar advisor to Lord Bhayar, and I was sent to Tilbor to advise the princeps there. During that time, the hill holders revolted, and I ended up in service, just in order to survive. I proved somewhat effective, and after the revolt was put down, I was appointed princeps. After the eruption and earthquake leveled part of Extela, Lord Bhayar's ancestral home, he sent me and Vaelora there. For a short period I was provincial governor until Rex Kharst attacked Ferravyl, and I was once more pressed into service in charge of a battalion. I fear I lack the experience to command more than a few regiments, and Lord Bhayar is wise enough not to tariff me beyond my abilities."

Cleotyr frowned. "So you have worked your way up to commanding large forces in only a few years?"

"Commander Quaeryt is unduly modest," replied Skarpa. "He is the most effective commander in Lydar today. He was responsible for the destruction of Rex Kharst's forces at Ferravyl and at the battle of Variana. He has survived wounds and experiences that would have killed lesser men. They have taken their toll in other ways, you might notice."

Quaeryt appreciated the tactful allusion to his brilliant white hair.

"Still…" pressed Cleonie.

Cleotyr's glance at her was like a crossbow bolt.

Cleonie smiled. "There must be a story behind how you two came to be wed."

"There is," said Vaelora. "I wrote him letters until my brother

commanded me to wed him."

The High Holder's wife blinked.

"And Lord Bhayar told me that he would have my head if I ever disrespected her," added Quaeryt with a low laugh.

"That is indeed quite a story," said Cleotyr, "and someday we hope to hear all of it … if you wish, of course."

"As a High Holder"-Quaeryt turned in his chair to the burly man-"you must have spent some considerable time in Variana."

"More than I would have liked, I must admit, but one's attendance was often required, if only to show … a modicum of support for the rex."

"All Lydar has heard rumors of the, shall I say, stringency of the late rex toward those who disagreed or were less than eager to cooperate with his wishes." Quaeryt almost said "whims," but decided against it. "I also talked with a number of High Holders on the way to Variana. I got the impression that being a High Holder, especially when in Variana, could require … great skill and delicacy…"

"Great skill and delicacy!" Cleotyr laughed heartily, if with a slight undertone of bitterness. "You do have a way with words. Yes, skill and delicacy … but better than that was silence except when addressed and a look of thoughtful consideration, no matter how outrageous the conversation … or the proposed diversions. But then … as a High Holder of modest means in the country, it was … useful … to be overlooked."

"How did you find Variana, when you were there?" Vaelora asked Cleonie. "Were some of the more noted High Holders as polished and scheming as has been said?"

"Those in favor were most polished," replied the petite woman. "The most despicable were the most mannered. High Holder Ryel … they said he was Kharst's spymaster, for all that he was the minister of waterways. I never saw his wife, though she was supposedly an outland beauty of wealth, but any of that wealth went toward his schemes." Cleonie glanced at her husband. "I don't care. He's dead, you said, and he wasn't as bad as the other ones, the one Kharst banished to his lands, or the one who walled up his wife…"

Ryel? Hadn't Eluisa D'Taelmyn, Rescalyn's mistress, said something about a High Holder of that name? Quaeryt couldn't remember what, though. *And so did someone else* …

"He is dead, as are all those High Holders who were most polished," said Cleotyr heavily. "Rex Kharst summoned them to him when he heard Lord Bhayar was marching on Variana."

"Why?" asked Skarpa.

"To see his triumph over Lord Bhayar with the trap he had laid. He could not conceive that a ruler so much younger could have

developed a greater trap." Cleotyr looked at Quaeryt. "You were the one who executed it, were you not?"

Quaeryt offered a puzzled expression.

The High Holder chuckled. "I'm not much of a man for fighting. I know lands and how to run them, but I know men, and I've watched rulers. From what the submarshal has said, and from the way he defers to you, and from the woman to whom you're wed, and from the mission you're on with only a modest army, I'd judge you had much to do with Lord Bhayar's success."

"None of it would have been possible without Submarshal Skarpa," Quaeryt demurred, "or without the leadership of Lord Bhayar."

Cleotyr nodded slowly. "I can see that Lord Bhayar will have a long and peaceful rule, and I would appreciate your conveying my support of that rule." He offered a laugh that was somewhat forced. "And now … might we talk of the weather, the best in wines and lagers … until the refreshments are ready?"

"Do you have your own vineyards?" asked Vaelora gently.

"Alas, no. The wine comes from the lands of my distant cousin … but the lager … all the grains and hops are grown here, and the lager is indeed brewed here … in the fashion developed by my grandsire … although I will say that I have made some modest improvements over the years, and even my son, who is visiting relatives in the north with his bride, has been most helpful in that regard…"

Quaeryt could not help but note the wary expression in Cleonie's eyes whenever she looked in his direction, but he sensed that little more of import would be mentioned for the duration of their visit.

11

Quaeryt and Vaelora did not return to the canal boat until well after sixth glass and only ate lightly, given that High Holder Cleotyr's "refreshments" had been endless and lavish. Solayi morning, they set out early because they had to cover more than six milles to pass through the two locks at Eluthyn and cross the Phraan River in order to meet Skarpa's Southern Army and the Eleventh and Nineteenth Regiments by eighth glass.

They had covered close to three milles before they encountered the first of the grain boats heading eastward, followed by several others, which slowed their progress. The lockmasters did give them priority, that being assured by Zhelan riding ahead with a squad of first company, so that they cleared the second lock slightly before eighth glass.

At a quint past eighth glass Skarpa arrived at the moving canal boat and swung himself onboard. As he entered the salon, Vaelora began to rise from where she had been reading while Quaeryt sat at the narrow salon table, poring over a map of the lands of Khel.

"Please don't leave because of me, Lady," Skarpa said immediately. "As an envoy you need to hear anything I say. If you do not, then Quaeryt will not have your best judgment for counsel." He held up a hand. "Do not tell me that you are but a woman or some such nonsense."

Vaelora laughed. "I will not." She moved to seat herself at the table beside her husband.

"How did matters go after we departed?" asked Quaeryt.

"Quietly." Skarpa barked a harsh laugh. "You two terrified them, you know?"

"Cleonie was wary," said Quaeryt.

"Her husband was far more than that. When he said good evening to me last night, he offered some words to the effect that he had seen more capability in his salon yesterday than in the entire Chateau Regis in the past ten years."

"That has to have been an exaggeration. A number of the Bovarian officers were quite good tacticians and strategists," returned Quaeryt dryly. "I know, unhappily. So do you."

"That's not the same thing," interjected Vaelora. "A bad ruler can have good officers."

"Especially lower-level senior officers," pointed out Skarpa, with a quick look at Quaeryt.

"At times." Quaeryt's words were equally bland.

"You two." A certain disgust colored Vaelora's short response.

“What else did he say?”

“He suggested, very indirectly, that when an effective commander married to a ruler’s sister was not a marshal, that alone was enough to treat the ruler with respect. He did say that sending you as an envoy, Lady Vaelora, showed a ruler well in control of his land.”

For now. Quaeryt did not voice that thought

“That is a useful impression,” she said.

“What else?” asked Quaeryt.

Skarpa smiled. “We did get quite a lot of supplies, especially grain for the horses. Sometimes, respect pays in more than words.”

“Not often enough,” replied Quaeryt, “but it’s good when it happens.” He fingered his chin. “I fear that the farther we travel from Variana, the less people, even High Holders, will know, and the less respect we will receive, and the more power we will have to display.”

“Even along the Great Canal?” asked Vaelora.

“Even here as we go west,” replied Skarpa. “As Cleotyr pointed out, the High Holders with the most power were gathered in the Chateau Regis. They would be the most knowledgeable. Few Bovarian officers survived the battle, and news travels slowly. More slowly here than in Telaryn, except along the Aluse.”

“The roads…?” inquired Vaelora.

“Your brother, your father, and your grandsire spent golds on good roads,” replied Skarpa. “Except for a few roads along the River Aluse, more and more we are discovering that Rex Kharst and his forbears did not.”

Vaelora looked to Quaeryt. “You wrote about roads and canals.”

“They date back to the Naedarans, and they are all along the River Aluse. Kharst and the Bovarians only used them, and the Naedarans never ruled even as far west as Variana.”

“But how could he rule so vast a land…?”

“Through the High Holders, I would judge, although that is just a guess. He had nothing like your brother’s provincial governors. That is why he needed a corps of trained assassins-and a spymaster-to assure that the High Holders followed his dictates … at least mostly.”

At that moment Quaeryt realized where else he had heard the name Ryel-from Lady Fauxyn after he had crippled her husband-and that mention had been anything but favorable.

After that, the three of them looked over the canal map and discussed possible stops on the way to Laaryn and then the possibilities for heading downriver.

After Skarpa departed, Quaeryt looked to Vaelora.

“You’re worried about something else, aren’t you, dearest?”

“Why do you say that?”

She just looked at him, her brown eyes conveying amusement.

He shook his head. “Several things. First, I read over the documents appointing us as envoys again this morning-very carefully.” He nodded to the document on the table.

“And?”

“I’d like you to read this section. The same wording is in your document, by the way.” Quaeryt pointed, then waited as Vaelora read through the words.

… he is empowered to treat for and make agreements with those required or empowered to make and comply with terms of allegiance to Lord Bhayar of Telaryn, save that no terms hereunto entered into may be construed as limiting the existing powers and authorities of Lord Bhayar …

She looked up, puzzled. “He’s just saying that we can make agreements for him, but those agreements can’t limit his existing powers in Bovaria and Telaryn.”

Quaeryt nodded. “But … what’s interesting is that those powers are not limited to dealing with Khel. They would also allow us to gain agreement with High Holders who do not think they are part of Bovaria, or…”

Vaelora’s eyes widened. “You don’t think?”

“I don’t know what to think, except he is very careful about what power he grants. And he did say that some of the southern High Holders and some in the north may not have paid tariffs in years. You see why I was concerned?”

“I can see that, but it may never come to such. What else?”

“I need to ride with first company and the regiments, at least for most of the day.”

“We’ll ride with them. I’m an envoy, too.”

“Only when you feel good. If you don’t…”

“I promise.”

Quaeryt had his doubts about that, but refrained from voicing them.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” pressed Vaelora.

“Nothing I can put a finger on … I still feel uneasy. Have you had any farsights?”

“Besides the one where I saw you surrounded by ice? I’m not so certain I want to see any more like that … except…”

“That farsight saved my life, dear.”

“I know. That’s why I said ‘except.’”

Quaeryt frowned. “You didn’t answer my question. Have you-”

“Yes … but I’m not going to talk about it. You know why. Anything you say about it might color what I recall-and that would be dangerous because I might not recall it accurately when the time comes to understand what it means. That was something Grandmere

was very firm about."

"She was firm about many things, I have no doubt."

Quaeryt rose. "Are you ready to ride?"

"Are you?"

They both laughed.

12

For the next three days, almost all that Quaeryt and Vaelora did was ride with one of the companies, either first company or one of those in Eleventh or Nineteenth Regiment, and occasionally with Skarpa and his forces; share rations with the officers; and retire to the canal boat to sleep, then wake and begin the same pattern once more. The one other duty to which they attended was to write their respective missives to Bhayar, ostensibly reporting on what they had observed so far in their travels … and then dispatch them with a trooper courier and his escorts.

By midafternoon on Meredi, a chill wind blew, and light flakes of snow drifted intermittently out of light gray clouds, flakes that melted when they touched the towpath or the mare's mane or the sleeves of Quaeryt's uniform jacket.

"First snow of the year," observed Zhelan, riding to Quaeryt's right.

"Here," added Vaelora from his left. "It's likely snowed in Tilbor. More than once."

To Quaeryt, the snow was a reminder that the beginning of winter was just a bit more than three weeks away, and that they would be heading north from Kherseilles … and that Khelgror was as far north as was Tilbora. That meant riding into snow.

If only you had recovered sooner. But there was no way to undo what had been done, and waiting until spring would make matters worse, far worse.

He glanced ahead to see more than a score of people standing on a rise to the north of the towpath, watching as the vanguard rode westward. Many, if not all, appeared to be crofters and peasants from their worn trousers and shirts, the colors of which ranged from faded tans to washed-out grays and blues. Behind them were others bending and stooping among the stalks that remained green. Most of them, Quaeryt realized, were women, and those that were not were old men or children. The children were either shoeless or wore rags wrapped around feet.

"Who are they?" murmured Vaelora.

"Field workers, likely gleaning the fields after the harvest, trying to grub up the leftover grain or beans or whatever," replied Quaeryt.

"Autumn beans," added Zhelan quietly. "They're sweeter, but they're often frost-killed."

"I've heard of gleaning," said Vaelora, "but … it's different when you see it."

"When you see so many gleaning, especially soon after harvest,

that's often a sign of famine … or a greedy High Holder," said Zhelan.

"It wouldn't hurt to learn whose lands they glean," said Quaeryt.

"It might be better if I asked, sir, or had a squad leader ask."

"Try with a squad leader," suggested Quaeryt.

Zhelan turned in the saddle.

Quaeryt did not catch all the words but overheard the gist of the orders. "… don't press … just ask whose fine fields we're passing…"

"Yes, sir."

The three watched as the squad leader rode forward, behind the scouts, and then slowed. Several of the gleaners immediately moved away, but a tall woman with streaks of gray in her hair remained. Her posture was upright, and while Quaeryt could not hear what she said, he could tell that whatever she said was uttered emphatically. After a time the woman gave an abrupt nod and stepped back, her eyes fixing on the approaching riders, although Quaeryt could not determine at which of them she was looking.

The squad leader turned his mount and rode back to rejoin first company. When he reached the head of the column, Zhelan motioned for him to ride alongside, then asked, "What did she say?"

"She said that the lands belonged to High Holder Raynd. She also said that he was a disgrace to both the High Holders and to the Nameless because no just Almighty would let such an abomination live, let alone prosper."

"She said that?" asked Zhelan.

"Sure as I'm here riding, sir. Those are the words she said."

"We need to keep that name in mind." Quaeryt looked to Vaelora.

"I won't forget."

Quaeryt doubted that she would, not with such words from the gleaner and not when it was Vaelora's first sight of such countryside poverty. It was also another reminder to him of how she had been sheltered from certain cruel realities of the world, while being exposed to other cruelties and considerations that the gleaners could not imagine.

"We can't do anything … either…" murmured Vaelora to Quaeryt.

"Not now." *And perhaps never … or enough to help these poor folk, either.*

The dark-haired woman did not move from where she stood, watching as Quaeryt and Vaelora rode by and remaining motionless as the intermittent snow swirled around her and as the rest of the Southern Army rode and marched onward along the towpath toward Laaryn.

13

Slightly before eighth glass on a cool and hazy Samedi, Quaeryt once more looked to the Great Canal, empty of boats. He turned to Vaelora, riding beside Alazyn at the head of Nineteenth Regiment. "How long has it been since we've seen a canal boat?"

"We haven't seen any today," noted Alazyn.

"Midafternoon yesterday, I think," said Vaelora.

Quaeryt nodded. "Then there's some sort of problem, most likely with the locks, since the water level seems to be all right. I'm going to ride ahead and talk to Skarpa."

Vaelora glanced sideways at him.

"We'll ride up to talk to the submarshal."

Alazyn managed not to smile. "Yes, sir."

A quint later Quaeryt and Vaelora reined their mounts in beside Skarpa.

"What's on your mind?" asked the submarshal.

"That there aren't any boats on the canal." Quaeryt went on to explain. "So I think we should sent someone ahead to see what the problem might be."

"Meinyt. Just this morning he was telling me he wasn't used to riding in Bovaria without being attacked." Skarpa chuckled. "Besides, that will irritate Kharllon."

"Is he getting to you?" asked Quaeryt.

"Only in the quiet way that he's looking to find any mistake I might make."

"Him and Meurn," said Quaeryt.

"Would you have expected anything less of Deucalon?"

Quaeryt laughed.

In less than half a quint, Meinyt and one of the companies from his Fifth Regiment were moving westward at a good clip along the towpath. Almost two glasses passed before the subcommander and his company returned. Skarpa called a halt and let the troopers rest while the three senior officers and Vaelora met at the edge of the towpath.

"There aren't any boats because there's trouble in Laaryn," Meinyt began. "That's what the town councilor told me. An old white-bearded fellow. He came out to meet me with some factors. They said a full company of Bovarian foot has occupied the lock houses." Meinyt shook his head. "Sounds like an alehouse tale, but I thought I'd report and see what you thought."

"They must want something," said Vaelora.

"Supposedly, they want Bhayar to allow them to rule western Bovaria as independent. The councilor says that they've drained all

the locks and put barrels of gunpowder against the lock gates to destroy them."

"Did you see that?" asked Skarpa.

"The locks are empty of water-one is, anyway. The councilor didn't want me closer. He said the troopers would kill some hostages. They kept looking back at the lock houses. I didn't see anyone moving-except for one trooper at the door of the closest lock house."

"What's to keep us from just moving in and taking them out?" asked Skarpa.

"They say they've captured the firstborn sons of fifty factors and merchants, and if their terms aren't met, they'll cut all their throats." Meinyt shook his head. "I don't like people who hold others for ransom. Don't like folks who tell stories like that, either. Just as soon take 'em all out. Besides, I can't believe they'd let their own troopers take so many hostages."

"The locals can't expect Bhayar to give in," Skarpa pointed out.

"That doesn't matter," said Vaelora. "What matters is that we can't appear weak."

Quaeryt frowned. *But why block the canal? It would take weeks for Bhayar to find out.* He looked to Meinyt, then Skarpa. "Would any company you've ever commanded do something like this? Would anyone who's ever commanded come up with a story like that?"

"It's not likely," said Skarpa.

Meinyt shook his head.

"Given the way Kharst punished men…" suggested Vaelora.

"So what do we do?" mused Skarpa.

"Did you see any troopers … or any men with arms? Besides the one?" asked Quaeryt.

It was Meinyt's turn to frown. "No. The councilor begged me not to approach the lock houses too closely."

"What are we supposed to do, then?"

"Send their request to Bhayar and wait for a response."

"I'd like to try something different," said Quaeryt.

Vaelora offered a concerned glance.

"I'd like you to march one of the regiments toward the locks. Stop a good half mille short and hold them there. Tell the councilor that you will wait there for Lord Bhayar's reply."

"And?"

"I'd like to see what is actually happening."

"I take it," said Skarpa dryly, "that they won't happen to see you?"

"I'd be very surprised if they did."

"We'll just take the whole army until we're about two milles from the edge of Laaryn," Skarpa announced. "Fifth Regiment will be the

one making the appearance."

Meinyt nodded, as if he had expected nothing else.

"And your imager undercaptains will be in the van with Subcommander Meinyt and me," Skarpa added.

A quint later Fifth Regiment rode westward at the front of the long column. Quaeryt and Vaelora rode behind Skarpa and Meinyt, with the eight imager undercaptains following them.

Vaelora eased her mount closer to his. "What are you thinking, dearest?"

"I think you know. Troopers wouldn't take a canal, or hold the firstborn sons of factors for ransom. Who benefits from closing the canal, especially in wartime?"

"And they didn't expect an army?"

He nodded.

"Then why not…? Oh … we'd have no idea…"

"Exactly, and it will be better if…"

Vaelora nodded, but said no more as they continued riding.

Noon had come and gone, and it was close to the first glass of the afternoon before they could see the buildings ahead spreading away from the Great Canal.

"The first lock house is a bit more than two milles from here," Meinyt declared.

"Column! Halt!" ordered Skarpa.

In moments, or so it seemed to Quaeryt, he and the imagers were moving out with Skarpa and Fifth Regiment, leaving Vaelora with Zhelan and first company.

When the vanguard of Fifth Regiment reached the millestone with the number two on it, roughly a mille from the lower lock, Skarpa called a halt and looked to Quaeryt and Meinyt.

"Submarshal, I'd suggest that you ride forward with a squad and two imager undercaptains who can provide shields. I'd recommend that you announce to the town councilor that you're stationing one regiment here for the moment, with the others slightly farther away, and that you'd like to talk to the leader of the mutineers."

Meinyt raised his eyebrows as if to ask why Skarpa would be doing the talking.

"I'll be there," said Quaeryt. "The submarshal just won't see me. I'd rather not walk that distance." He turned to Skarpa. "I doubt that you'll have to say much more, but if you do, just tell whoever it is that you'll have to send a dispatch to Bhayar."

"They'll claim they won't wait for that. They'll threaten to kill people."

"Then say that any deaths will be on their heads. Stall them however you can." Quaeryt turned in the saddle. "Voltyr! Desyrk!

Forward."

Before long, flanked by the undercaptains, Skarpa rode forward. Quaeryt rode just behind Desyrk, and following him was a squad of troopers. Quaeryt held a concealment shield only in front of himself and the mare, so that the troopers saw him perfectly, although Skarpa and the undercaptains could not.

To Quaeryt's right was a lane that paralleled the canal. The riders continued on the towpath for another hundred yards before the lane curved away to the west-northwest, and Quaeryt rode past the first of several structures that looked to be traders' or factors' warehouses. As seemed to be common along the Great Canal, they were constructed of the same dull red brick that Quaeryt had observed day after day in the small towns through which they had ridden. Unlike in many towns, though, the buildings appeared to be roofed in fired clay tiles.

As Quaeryt had suspected would happen, when they neared the section of the towpath some fifty yards short of the lock gates of the lower lock, the white-bearded town councilor, accompanied by two muscular young men, hurried forward.

Skarpa reined up, as did the group. Quaeryt dismounted and walked the mare forward and to the right side of Desyrk, so that the undercaptain could see him. There he handed the reins to Desyrk, before stepping to the side and extending his concealment shield to surround himself. He stood, waiting to hear what the white-bearded man had to say.

"Sir … I told the other officer…"

"I'm Submarshal Skarpa of the Southern Army. There are nine regiments behind me. Who are you?"

"Town councilor Moraes … Please, sir, do not approach closer. They will kill too many."

"Who are they?"

"The soldiers who hold the locks … and our sons."

"What do you expect us to do, Councilor?" demanded Skarpa coolly. "I understand from Subcommander Meinyt that these mutineers have some ridiculous idea about governing their own land."

"Yes, sir … yes, sir."

"Then it's our duty to remove them," Skarpa declared. "Lord Bhayar isn't about to stand for something like that."

"Please, sir … please wait … please."

"I'll give them a glass to come out and talk to me. No more."

"But … sir…"

"Tell them what I said."

The councilor's shoulders sagged. "Yes … yes … I will tell them." He turned and began to trudge back, with the two muscular men, each with a truncheon, walking on each side of him, perhaps a pace back.

As Quaeryt followed them, he noticed a single canal boat, well appointed, tied to the wall just below the lower lock. When he was almost abreast of the boat, he saw that the shutters were closed and locked, and the hatches or doors were chained shut. Yet he could see marks in the towpath that indicated cargo had been rolled or carried to the boat, and that it rode lower in water, with the canal water slightly above its waterline. The doors of the warehouse across from it were chained shut as well.

Probably a factor trying to save his cargo from the rapacious Telaryn barbarians. Quaeryt shook his head and returned his attention to the men he followed.

The three were silent until they reached the long stone ramp that angled up beside the lower lock.

"You should have tried harder, Moraes…" said the taller younger man.

"With a Telaryn submarshal?" The older man's voice was plaintive. "You heard what they did at Variana."

"What do we care about that?"

The other man with the truncheon turned and looked back.

Quaeryt froze.

"What is it?"

"Coulda sworn I heard someone else."

"There's no one else around, not close enough you could hear steps. Just keep walking," said the tall man.

The north side of the lower lock was almost ten yards wide. Quaeryt glanced up. From what he could see, a lock house stood at each end, one just short of the eastern lock gate and one just below the western lock gate. The ramp rose until it was level with the top of the lock at the west end, and then flattened out for some fifty yards. Besides of the one trooper standing outside the easternmost lock house, Quaeryt saw no one else near the locks or the canal.

That single trooper standing by the lock-house door paced back and forth.

Pacing … not marching. Quaeryt frowned.

The lower lock looked to be largely empty of water, although he could not see the bottom of the lock from where he was. *At least one lock empty, the one that leads to Eluthyn. What about the one that serves that part of the canal that meets the River Laar?* The town councilor had said that both lock gates were charged with gunpowder. Quaeryt wanted to shake his head. Just placing bags of gunpowder against oak-timbered locks and lighting them off might only create superficial damage and might not even strain the lock-gate timbers. He glanced toward the closed gate to the upper lock, but there was no way to tell whether it was full or empty.

Abruptly the three men turned to the right, walking toward a narrow stone-paved lane between two brick buildings.

At the far end of the lane, Quaeryt could see that the street was blocked with barrels set on their butts, with ropes wound around each barrel and then stretched to the next. Behind the barrels stood men with truncheons and clubs, facing north and away from Quaeryt. Beyond them were more than a few men and women.

As Quaeryt stepped into the partly shaded lane, he strained to see if he could hear some of what was being said. Most of the words were lost, but he did catch a few louder phrases.

"… no, you can't go there. Lord Bhayar's got an army coming through…"

"… you want to get trampled?"

"… don't care if it is market Samedi…"

The three men he followed turned left into an open archway, and Quaeryt had to hurry to catch up to them as they stepped through two battered doors that were swung back. In the open space before rows of bales and barrels stood nine men.

Immediately a tall and stout gray-bearded man turned. He wore a rich brocade jacket and black woolen trousers, with a silver stripe down the outside seam of each leg. "What happened?"

"They've got a submarshal there, like Moraes told you. He says he's got nine regiments. He said we had a glass to get one of the mutineers out there to talk."

"We can't get everyone out that fast, not all the men who are manning the barriers."

"They'll talk…"

"How were we to know that bastard Bhayar would send an army this way so soon? None of those in Variana-"

"They probably traveled faster than any messengers…"

"… don't know if the Telaryns let anyone ride out…"

"… have to do something…"

Quaeryt surveyed the interior of the warehouse for several moments, before imaging a thin layer of stone across the far door, then across the two windows. A whitish mist filled the warehouse, caused by the chill of the imaging. While holding full protective shields, he dropped the concealment shields.

The factors turned. As their faces took in the uniform, several swallowed.

One younger and burlier factor pulled out a blade and charged Quaeryt. When he hit Quaeryt's unseen shields, the force of his impact threw him off balance, but the blade did not leave his hand until he slammed down on the stone floor. His head twisted, and the side of his face hit the stone as well.

Another factor raised a heavy pistol, awkwardly starting to cock it.

Quaeryt imaged the weapon out of existence, then image-projected his voice with absolute authority. “None of you are going anywhere. Not for a time.”

“Who are you?” demanded the tall and stout gray-bearded man.

“Commander Quaeryt Rytersyn, in the service of Lord Bhayar. I can tell you also that he will not appreciate the attempted closure, even temporarily, of the Great Canal.” Quaeryt once more studied the inside of the warehouse for several moments, then imaged more stone across two other possible exits, a boarded-up window, and what looked to be a trapdoor, behind the barrels. Then he stepped back and imaged a stone barrier to fill the archway.

Once outside, he raised his concealment shields and walked around the warehouse, sealing two other doors and three windows. Then he hurried up the second ramp to the upper lock, filled with water. He looked to the west. Beyond the upper lock were scores of boats moored to the canal walls, but very few crewmen in sight.

Quaeryt couldn’t help frowning, but he turned and walked down the upper ramp, past the empty lower lock, down the second ramp, quickly, past the locked canal boat, the only one in sight below the lock, and out to where Skarpa waited, dropping the concealment as he neared Skarpa, the undercaptains, and the squad.

Even before he mounted the mare, he began to explain. “The local factors are behind this. I’ve sealed some of them in a warehouse, but they certainly aren’t the only ones. They have men blocking off access to the canal…” When he finished describing the situation, he added, “I’d suggest we take over the canal and the warehouses first and then sort through who else might be part of this.”

Skarpa’s smile was almost predatory. “I would agree, Commander. If you would dispatch one of your undercaptains to inform the other regiments to join us.”

“Undercaptain Voltyr, do so at once. Begin with Commander Kharllon and then Subcommander Meinyt.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once Voltyr rode back toward the remainder of Southern Army, Quaeryt turned to Skarpa. “We’ll need to have companies assigned to protect the locks. From what I could tell, there are no charges, but I didn’t have a chance to look closely.”

“If we keep everyone away until your imagers can deal with the locks, it won’t matter,” Skarpa pointed out.

“We’ll also need to capture the men blocking off the canal…”

Skarpa and Quaeryt had finished their plans a good quint before all the regiments had arrived. Once they did, Quaeryt and Skarpa rode

near the head of Fifth Regiment as the Southern Army rode into Laaryn. Over her unvoiced objections-not that Quaeryt had not noticed her frown-Vaelora remained farther back with Zhelan and first company.

One of Skarpa's regiments split off to the north, moving out in order to flank the factors' men at the barrel barricades. In less than half a glass, the regiments had encircled both locks and had captured most of the men who had been behind the roped-off barrels.

Before dealing with the factors walled up in the warehouse, now surrounded by two companies from Meinyt's first battalion, and with Voltyr and Horan standing by there just in case, Quaeryt first approached and checked the upper lock, still closed at both ends and holding water, if at a slightly lower level than the canal leading to the River Laar, which he hadn't noticed earlier. He could find no sign of explosives anywhere. He inspected the smaller lock house, but it was empty. After that he approached the main lock house of the upper lock. He continued to hold full shields and hoped that there weren't any explosives inside.

Even from fifteen yards away, Quaeryt could see that the door was chained shut, with an old and rusty but large and heavy lock. He paused, then imaged away the lock hasp, and waited. Nothing happened. He moved forward, finally, unfastening the remainder of the chain and easing open the door.

Inside was a figure gagged and bound to a chair. Behind the chair were long and heavy levers, most likely for controlling the water flows into or out of the lock. Quaeryt moved to the chair, then took out his belt knife and cut the ropes binding the man's hands, then untied the gag.

The lockman, gray-haired, with a short gray and brown beard, coughed several times before he finally spoke. "Never thought I'd be thanking a Telaryn officer for saving me." He frowned. "You are Telaryn? That's no uniform I ever saw."

"I'm a Telaryn commander," Quaeryt admitted. "We have an army taking back the canal."

"Hope you get whoever did this." The lockman rubbed his wrists where the ropes had been fastened, then stood and stretched, gingerly. "Wasn't supposed to be like this."

Quaeryt thought the man was unsteady. "You need to sit down. I'll have someone get you some water or ale or something. Who tied you up? What did you mean by it not being as it was supposed to be?"

"They close the canal every so often for repairs. Never saw any repairs most times. This time, I said to Pharn-he's the head lockman-said that we didn't need repairs, and with the war, folk in Variana needed grain and food. He looked at me funny, then walked off. Next

thing I knew, there were three big fellows in brown. Grabbed me and tied me up. Never saw 'em before in my life." The lockman snorted as he sat down. "That's something in a place like Laaryn."

"Did they say anything that said who or why they did it?"

"Not a word. Just told me I'd be all right if I didn't fight."

"You've been here for a while."

"Close to a day, I figure. Ruined my clothes."

Quaeryt had noted the odor, but ignored it. "Did they mention gunpowder or anything like that?"

"No. Heard some hammering and smelled coal or charcoal, like someone was forging. Don't know why, though."

"Take it easy…"

When he finished with the lockman, Quaeryt made his way down to the lower lock, still empty except for a few digits of water covering the bottom of the lock. As closely as he looked, he could find no sign of gunpowder or other explosives. Then he carefully approached and checked the lock houses. The smaller one was empty, as was the larger one. As he left the larger one, he couldn't help but frown. *Only one lockman tied up?* That suggested that some of the canal workers, likely the head lockman, had been cooperating with or been co-opted by the factors. *But you might never find out which.*

He shook his head. The older he got, the more he discovered that there were all too many questions to which the answers remained unknown or obscured in some fashion. He paused and looked closely at the eastern end of the lower lock gate, noticing for the first time a band of iron linking the iron plate of the housing into which the lock gate recessed to the plate at the end of the lock gate. Someone had forge-welded the lock gate closed. Trying to cold-chisel it open would likely damage the gates so much they might not hold water.

Quaeryt smiled. Imaging would take care of that.

14

After dispatching a ranker with a water bottle to the upper lock house, Quaeryt went to find Skarpa. The submarshal was standing in the shaded lane beside the archway Quaeryt had imaged closed with stone. Predictably, by then, Vaelora was also there, if guarded by Voltyr, Lhandor, and Khalis, as was Meinyt.

"So far as I can tell, there aren't any explosives around the locks or in the lock houses," Quaeryt announced. "They did tie up one lockman and left him. He could have died, for all they seemed to care. He has no idea who was behind it, except that the head lockman, named Pharn, said they were closing the canal for repairs. When the lockman protested and said that they didn't need repairs, before long three men he didn't know grabbed him and bound him to a chair, then chained the lock-house door."

"It was planned, then, here in town," said Vaelora.

"By the factors. That's the way it looks."

"Your factors haven't tried to break out," said Skarpa, adding with a straight face, "I could see that they might have trouble, though. The troopers rounded up close to fifty bravos with clubs or truncheons and a score or so of factors, mostly younger men."

"We'll have to talk to all of them," said Quaeryt. "Well … maybe not all the bravos, but all the factors. I think we need to find a good inn and use a chamber there. I'd suggest we start with the younger ones first … and leave the factors inside the warehouse for now."

"They won't be happy." Skarpa grinned.

"That's the idea. I don't think they understand what they did. Or rather the seriousness of what they did." Quaeryt paused. "Either that, or they thought that in the disruption following the conquest of eastern Bovaria, no one would notice."

"Why did they do it?" asked Meinyt.

"If grain shipments to Variana are stopped, the price of grain will go up. The factors will receive more when they resume shipping," Quaeryt said.

"Why didn't they just refuse to ship?"

"They could do that, but grain likely comes down the River Laar from other growers, factors, and High Holders. Unless they take control of the canal, the shipments go on, and the prices stay lower than they desire." Quaeryt shrugged. "Then when we showed up they spread the story that mutineers did it … and, well, if the mutineers ran off when we approached or got tired and gave up, who's to know?"

"Why didn't they just stick to the story about repairs?" asked

Meinyt.

"I'm guessing that they're saving that for all the future times when Bhayar doesn't have an army near. Even if people suspect, who is going to accuse any group of factors who can raise enough muscle to seize the canal? The High Holders won't care. The price for their grain goes up as well. Besides, there's grain and flour here in Laaryn, and the local price will likely go down for a time, and most people don't care that much if it costs more somewhere else."

"Real bastards," offered Meinyt in a low voice.

Vaelora nodded.

"We need to find an inn and quarters for the regiments," Skarpa announced.

Close to another glass passed before Skarpa, Vaelora, Meinyt, and Quaeryt stood just inside the entry hall of the Canal Inn, located on the east side of the square set just to the east of the point of land that overlooked where the canal joined the River Laar. The inn was not that ancient as Bovarian inns went, Quaeryt judged, likely only thirty years old and probably built not that long after the Great Canal had been completed. The three-story squarish structure with the dull red brick walls that seemed so prevalent along the canal boasted a large public room, two plaques rooms, one larger and more elegantly appointed than the other, a good-sized entry hall, and an imposing facade with stone columns flanking the entry, and two covered side porches.

Khaern remained in charge of the canal area, and Zhelan and first company had taken over the exterior of the warehouse imprisoning the local factors, with Voltyr in charge of the imager undercaptains, who remained there in order to assure that the factors remained behind the walls.

"How do you think we should handle this?" asked Skarpa, looking to Quaeryt.

"You shouldn't be the one questioning all the factors. That makes them feel too important. They should be almost beneath your notice-at least until their punishment is announced."

"What about justicers?" asked Vaelora.

"Blocking the Great Canal isn't a matter for a local justicer, assuming Kharst even had them. Besides…" Quaeryt smiled.

"You've acted as a justicer for Bhayar," she finished.

"And you're a full commander," added Skarpa.

"We'll just take over one of the plaques rooms and bring them in one at a time," said Quaeryt. "By the time I finish with the younger ones, the ones in the warehouse might be getting a message."

In less than a quint, Quaeryt was seated behind a table in the more luxurious of the plaques rooms, waiting.

The first of those captured to appear before Quaeryt, escorted by two solid rankers, did not look much older than Khalis, the youngest of the imager undercaptains, a beardless youth with well-trimmed brown hair and matching gray trousers and jacket … not to mention a bruise along his left jaw and a slight scabbed cut on his forehead. His hands were bound behind him.

"Who are you, and what were you doing with the bravos who were blocking people from getting near the canal?" asked Quaeryt.

"Might I ask who you are and what your authority over me is?"

The question was worded politely enough, but the condescending arrogance behind the words grated on Quaeryt. He smiled politely, projecting absolute authority and total contempt before he uttered a single word. "I'm Commander Quaeryt Rytersyn, scholar, former justicer, and officer in the Telaryn Southern Army. My authority comes from Lord Bhayar and the nine regiments that have occupied Laaryn after some group unlawfully blocked the Great Canal. Now … answer the questions."

The youth staggered back a step, then swallowed. "You can't…"

"This is wartime. You were part of a group that was caught blocking a canal to cargo and supplies. That's treason. If necessary, I can order your execution. I will if I have to. I'd rather not, because you're not worth the time or effort." Rather than say more, Quaeryt waited.

"I'm Coryal D'Coryt. I was trying to get to my father's warehouse when your men snatched everyone in sight. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Quaeryt sighed, loudly, then looked to the two rankers. "Put him in the empty cellar. We'll take care of him later, along with the others. Have the major send in a few of the bravos."

"You will be sorry," said the youth.

Quaeryt shook his head sadly.

The next man was a broad-shouldered bravo in brown, with a wide leather belt and well-trimmed hair and beard.

He's too well groomed for a typical bravo. "Your name?" asked Quaeryt.

"Huddn."

"Why were you blocking off the canal?"

"Why not? The swells paid half silver a day for me to hold a truncheon and keep folks off."

"Did they tell you why they wanted the canal blocked?"

"Yesterday, it was for repairs. This morning they said it was because Lord Bhayar's army was coming."

"Who do you work for?"

"Whoever pays me."

"Who paid you yesterday?"

Huddn shrugged. "Don't know his name. Young fellow dressed like a factor. Blond, short beard. Probably not old enough to grow more. Didn't give his name. Paid all of Voryn's crew."

Quaeryt asked more questions, but it was clear that Huddn knew little more than he'd revealed at the beginning. The same was true of the next five bravos. The sixth gave his name as Voryn.

"So you have a crew," said Quaeryt. "What do they do for you?"

"Work. Most times, we load or offload the canal boats. Other times, we'll keep order for factors, like when they have a fest for their help."

"Or when they want people kept away from the Great Canal?"

Voryn nodded, his wide-spaced eyes wary.

"How often does that happen?"

"Not often. Maybe three-four times in the past few years. Called in more muscle this morning, though."

"Who pays for you and your crew when that happens?"

"Factors' council."

"Who's on the council?"

"Don't know them all. Old factor Coryt … Aelsam, Yudrow … Barkudan. Those are the ones I know."

"What other factors use the canal for shipping, enough to need a crew…"

Quaeryt continued with his questions.

Three glasses later, Quaeryt decided he'd heard enough. He'd also finished quick interrogations with those the rankers had rounded up-more than ten young factors or factors' assistants, and more than a score of hired bravos or loaders.

Once the last of the assistants was out of the chamber, he sent word to Zhelan to have the imagers open the sealed warehouse and to bring all those inside to the inn for questioning. Then he requested that Skarpa and Vaelora join him. He was pacing around the plaques table when they arrived and closed the door behind themselves.

Skarpa said nothing, just looked at Quaeryt inquiringly.

"I'm sure we don't know everything. From what I've heard, this isn't the first time the factors have closed the canal. They've done the same thing before, once for almost two weeks."

"Just to keep their prices higher?" asked Skarpa.

Vaelora only nodded, sadly.

"The one thing that's strange is that someone called in more bravos-and paid them-this morning. None of the bravos knew who had paid. They didn't recognize the man who had the silvers." Quaeryt frowned. "That doesn't make much sense. Why would they do that with Southern Army marching toward Laaryn?"

"Maybe someone else did," suggested Vaelora.

Quaeryt shook his head. "Of course."

Skarpa glanced from Quaeryt to Vaelora and back again. "Of course?"

"Someone who's not happy with the canal closings paid for more bravos … either to make things seem worse than they were or to make certain we did something to stop the closings." Quaeryt shrugged. "We may have trouble finding out who that was. I think it's time to talk to the factors we walled up. I've already sent for them."

"Do you want either of us there?" asked Skarpa.

"Not now. I might need Vaelora before long, though."

"Me? A mere woman?"

Quaeryt managed to avoid wincing. "An envoy and sister of the mighty Lord Bhayar, far more prestigious than a mere commander, of whom there are many."

Vaelora did smile. "I'll take my leisure in the other plaques room."

"That's a very good idea … but not until we get word that the factors have arrived." He turned to Skarpa. "What do you think about the whole matter?"

"From what I've seen, the factors here are wealthy. They were surprised that we offered no deference to them."

"I don't think many of them have ever seen troopers," added Vaelora. "The children peer out of windows at them."

Quaeryt found himself frowning. *How had Kharst kept order, especially given the nature of his High Holders?*

"There are also no High Holders close to Laaryn," added Skarpa. "The scouts report that the closest high holding is fifteen miles north."

The silence that followed was broken by a knock. Then Zhelan eased the door open. "Sirs, Lady Vaelora … the captives from the warehouse are outside on the porch."

Skarpa rose, as did Vaelora.

"Send in the white-bearded town councilor first," instructed Quaeryt as he rose, "after the submarshal and Lady Vaelora leave."

"Yes, sir."

Vaelora gave Quaeryt a parting smile. Skarpa shook his head as he left.

A short time later Moraes-the white-bearded town councilor-stepped gingerly into the plaques room. He peered at Quaeryt, then shuffled forward. "Sir … you're the officer who walled us up. I tell you, sir, it wasn't my idea to close the canal."

"This time or all the other times?" asked Quaeryt dryly.

Moraes was silent.

So was Quaeryt.

Finally, the older man cleared his throat. “What would you have me do, sir? No one dares go against the factors’ council.”

“Why not?”

“Things … happen to those who do. Unfortunate things … dwellings burn … dray horses sicken … accidents happen to children … shipments of goods vanish…” Moraes did not meet Quaeryt’s eyes.

“Who serves on the factors’ council?”

“The wealthy factors.”

“Who?”

“Aelsam, Fuadan, Coryt, Barkudan, and Yudrow.”

“Just five men?”

“There have always been five.”

“Moraes … do you have civil patrollers here in Laaryn?”

The councilor looked totally confused. Finally, he asked, “How did you know my name?”

“I’m good at listening. About the patrollers? Do you have them? I didn’t see any.”

“Yes, sir. We do.”

“Why weren’t they blocking off the canal?”

“The piers and warehouses in the town alongside the canal belong to the factors’ council or to various factors. The patrollers only keep order on the streets.”

“The factors’ bravos were on the streets blocking access to the canal. Where were the patrollers?”

“I’m certain they were there somewhere.” Moraes wet his lips nervously.

Quaeryt couldn’t help but wonder if some of the bravos were actually patrollers, especially given how suspiciously well groomed a number of them had been. He decided to keep those thoughts to himself. It wouldn’t have been the first time patrollers supplemented their pay by using their skills in other capacities. Or that those with wealth or power subverted the patrollers to their own ends. “How is the town council chosen?”

“The guilds choose two members, and the factors three. It’s always been that way. As long as I can remember.”

“You were chosen by the factors, I take it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And the factors tell the town council when to close the canal?”

“No, sir. The canal in Laaryn is under the authority of the factors’ council.”

More inquiry revealed little new, but that might well have been because he didn’t know enough to ask the right questions, and he finally dismissed Moraes back to custody. The next factor-thin, brown-haired, and intense in his expression-gave his name as Phaelan.

"What was your role in closing the Great Canal?" asked Quaeryt.

"My role, sir? I had none. The factors' council decides when to close the Great Canal."

"And you agreed with that decision?"

"I didn't question the factors' council, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because they're the council." Phaelan's expression conveyed a very definite message that questioning the council just wasn't done.

"Which factor is the head of the council?"

"There's no head. I suppose Barkudan has the most influence."

"Were they all caught with you in the warehouse?"

Phaelan shook his head "Barkudan and Coryt were there. I didn't see Yudrow or Fuadan. Aelsam wasn't there. He's recovering from a flux, I heard."

"Who pays the patrollers?"

"The town council."

"Where do they get the funds?"

"Most of the silvers come from the canal passage tariffs."

Quaeryt questioned Phaelan for another quint, then sent him back to the other captives.

The next two captives he saw were the two bravos who'd escorted Moraes. They had little to add, except that they'd been paid to protect the councilor. Quaeryt had some thoughts about what was meant by "protection," but both men insisted that their only task had been to accompany Moraes and to escort him back to report to Barkudan … and Barkudan was among those Quaeryt had not yet questioned.

After that, a younger factor with bruises on his face appeared. While Quaeryt couldn't be certain, he thought the man was the one who had attacked him with a blade.

"Your name?"

"Yudryt, Commander."

At least he recalls what I am.

"Can you tell me why the factors thought to deceive us about the reason why the Great Canal was closed?"

"They were worried. They thought that you might delay in arriving if you thought there were armed men holding innocents."

"Why were they worried?"

"I could not say."

That's a lie. "Why might they have been worried?"

"There was word that when people resisted, Lord Bhayar froze them to death."

That's not much better. "If they believed that, why did they not immediately just say that the canal had been closed and would reopen shortly?"

"I don't know. No one said. They were worried, but no one could say why."

"Are you the son of one of the factors on the council?"

For a moment Yudryt was silent.

Again, Quaeryt waited.

"Yes. Yudrow is my father."

"And he didn't tell you why the council had the councilor tell the submarshal the lie about rebel Bovarian troopers?"

"He didn't tell me anything except to meet him in the council warehouse."

Quaeryt strongly doubted that.

Young Yudryt had very little else to reveal, and Quaeryt dismissed him.

The next factor was Coryt, the man who had pulled the pistol on Quaeryt.

"Why did you tell the submarshal that stupid story about rebelling troopers?"

"I didn't. Barkudan told Moraes to stall-"

"Why?"

"We didn't expect a Telaryn army marching along the Great Canal and demanding that it be opened immediately. If Lord Bhayar wanted to change the way the canal is operated, he should have let us know." Coryt's tone was polite, with an undercurrent of puzzlement, and a faint hint of the accusatory.

"He did. He sent us. Instead of saying that you'd open the canal immediately, you came up with a stupid story and tried to stall us. When I announced who I was, you tried to shoot me." Quaeryt smiled coolly.

"We didn't believe you, I'm sorry to say, but brigands have tried ruses for years."

"I take it that you close the canal whenever prices get too low in Variana?"

"No. Just when we believe that closing it will stabilize prices and keep grain and flour from flooding the market."

"And Rex Kharst was aware of this?"

"Of course. We'd have been fools to do something he didn't approve of."

Kharst approved of this? Quaeryt managed to keep his expression impassive. "Why did you order the lockman bound and chained in the lock house? He would have died."

"The lockman was bound and chained? That's not anything I know about."

"You didn't know? And you're on the factors' council?"

"The lockmaster handles things like that. I've told you what I

know."

Quaeryt had his doubts, but he didn't know enough to ask the questions that would trip up someone as smooth and sharp as Coryt.

The last factor was the tall and stout graybeard, whom Quaeryt recalled from the warehouse by the brocade jacket and black trousers with a silver stripe. "You are?"

"Barkudan D'Factorius of Laaryn. Might I ask why you have treated us so shabbily?"

Quaeryt ignored the question and the condescension behind it, as well as an arrogance that suggested Barkudan was used to being able to order Kharst's officers around. "Why did you close the Great Canal?"

"For the usual reasons."

"The usual reasons?" asked Quaeryt ironically.

"To keep the price of grain and flour up. That way, Commander, Rex Kharst received more golds in tariffs when the goods were delivered and sold in Variana."

Kharst agreed to that scheme? "The problem with that is that everyone else is inconvenienced, and those who are the poorest pay the most." That had been one of the problems in Extela. *And here it is again in a different guise.*

"That is indeed a problem if one is poor, but we should not have to lose golds because there are those who are poor."

Quaeryt decided to be dense. "Lose golds? How can you lose golds when you already have the grain? If the price is lower than what you purchased it at, all you have to do is wait."

"We might wait months, Commander, and we still have to pay our warehousemen, our loaders, our drivers … We might have to let them go, and that means more people are poor and without food. No … it is much better to keep the prices as stable as we can … not that such would be a concern for a fighting man."

"All of that makes sense from your point of view, but there are several things that don't. For example, why was a lockman bound and gagged and left chained inside a lock house?"

"I doubt that was the case," Barkudan replied smoothly. "If someone was there when the canal was closed, they should not have been. The man doubtless was drinking and fell asleep there. No one noticed him when everything was locked up. It would have been an unfortunate accident, except for the fact that your men came along. He should be most grateful."

"Men who are drinking don't tie themselves to chairs and gag themselves."

Barkudan shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that."

Yes, you would, you slimy bastard. "To whom does the lockmaster

report?"

"To the factors' council. We pay them for doing their duties."

"And you knew nothing about the lockman?"

"I knew nothing until you told me."

Quaeryt could see that none of the factors were about to admit or acknowledge anything about the unfortunate lockman … or anything else, regardless of any pressure he could apply. He smiled, coldly. "You have repeatedly told the people of Laaryn and those trying to ship cargo from other places that the canal was closed for reasons that were untrue. You attempted to increase the golds in your coffers by lying. That is fraud, whether or not Rex Kharst approved or not. Doing so in war amounts to treason. The penalty for treason is death."

Barkudan swallowed. "You … you do not have the authority … not when we were carrying out Rex Kharst's wishes."

"Assuming that happened to be the case, that argument only had validity until you were aware that Lord Bhayar wished otherwise, yet all of you did nothing to accede to his requirements. Instead, you compounded your failures by lying to Lord Bhayar's representatives. As for authority, I have the authority of a senior officer commissioned by Lord Bhayar."

"That should not apply to a civil matter."

Quaeryt smiled once more. "I could dispute that. I won't. Instead, I will ask Lady Vaelora Chayardyr, an envoy of Lord Bhayar, and also his sister, to pass judgment on the matter."

"And when might this be?" asked Barkudan warily.

Quaeryt paused as the bells outside the inn began to ring-six chimes. *Is it that late already?* When the sound of the bells died away, he continued. "Shortly. Southern Army is escorting her to deal with the lands of Khel."

Sweat began to bead on the factor's forehead.

"Until then, you will remain in custody, and we will also seek out the other members of the factors' council so that all of you may share in that judgment."

Quaeryt could see Barkudan pale, if only slightly. He nodded to the troopers. "Take him out."

For several moments Quaeryt just sat behind the plaques table. After glasses of questioning people, he still had far too few answers. *You might have gotten more by using imaging* … He shook his head. The factors were far too cold and too experienced to be affected by his imaging feelings at them, and using some form of force against people who weren't using arms against him would only lead to more trouble than he wanted to deal with. He'd just have to find another way of discovering what he wanted to know.

He stood and walked to the door, opening it slowly and looking at

the ranker outside. “If you wouldn’t mind asking the submarshal and Lady Vaelora if they would join me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Quaeryt just stood by the plaques table, waiting, until the other two joined him, then gestured to the chairs.

“What did you find out?” asked Skarpa after he and Vaelora had seated themselves.

“Not enough.” Quaeryt took a deep breath. “If I can believe what all of these factors are saying, their council has been closing the canal as they think necessary in order to keep supplies of grain and flour from flooding into Variana. I wouldn’t be surprised if the factors in Eluthyn might not have been doing the same thing, but we didn’t catch them at it. The factors I questioned all claim that Kharst approved of this because the cargoes are tariffed when they’re sold in Variana and he received more tariff golds that way…” Quaeryt went on to summarize what he’d learned, then waited for their response.

“It makes sense, in a way,” said Vaelora. “It doesn’t raise prices here. So people don’t get upset…”

“But what about goods headed here?” asked Quaeryt. “I’d think…” He shook his head. “You’re right. Most other things people need are made locally. Still … there’s something that’s not right about it.”

“More than something,” added Skarpa.

“What do you think we should do?” asked Vaelora.

“Summon the factors’ council and order them not to close the canal except for repairs, and then for as short a time as practicable.”

“If we’re not here,” said Skarpa, “they’ll just claim the need for repairs and do the same thing.”

“We may have to leave a company or a battalion,” said Quaeryt, “but I can’t see having the canal closed while we’re still dealing with possible holdouts, rebels, Khel, and the border with Antiago. Can you?” He looked to Skarpa.

The submarshal shook his head.

“There’s one other thing. These factors are hiding something. I don’t know what. I think the imagers and first company should search every warehouse along the canal around the locks.” *For starters.* He paused. There was something … something that wasn’t quite right, that he was overlooking.

“That will take time,” Skarpa pointed out. “Where should they start?”

The one boat! The only boat.

“What is it?” asked Vaelora.

“Have them start with the one canal boat below the locks and the warehouse across from it, then move west.”

Skarpa nodded.

It's probably nothing except a concerned factor. Still …

"Oh … we need to find out if any smiths have been doing work on the canal locks lately."

"Smiths?"

"Someone forge-welded one of the lock gates shut."

"What about the factors' council?" asked Skarpa.

"We need to round all of them up and have them meet us here at ninth glass tomorrow. We only caught two of them in the warehouse. Maybe by the time we meet with them tomorrow we'll know more." He shrugged. "If not, we'll still likely have to be here another day." He paused. "We might as well get something to eat. Have the officers and men eaten?"

"I took care of that while you were dealing with the factors," said Skarpa. "It was the easier task. By far."

Quaeryt didn't argue. As he stood, he realized he needed to send one of the undercaptains to image away the steel plate on the lower lock, so that it could be used and the canal reopened. *Among other things.*

15

On Samedi night Quaeryt and Vaelora stayed in the largest and best appointed chamber in the Canal Inn. They woke early on Solayi, and Quaeryt washed, shaved, and dressed quickly, then headed downstairs to get a report from whatever officer had the duty. That turned out to be Captain Belaryk from Nineteenth Regiment, who could only report that Major Zhelan and a squad, with Undercaptain Voltyr and Desyrk, had departed the inn almost a glass earlier to complete tasks that had been halted by darkness and rain the evening before.

Quaeryt couldn't help feeling guilty, especially since he hadn't even noticed the rain.

"If you would have someone let me know when he returns, Captain, I'd appreciate it."

"Yes, sir."

After leaving the captain, Quaeryt arranged and paid for breakfast to be carried up to Vaelora, then followed the server back to their chamber, where, just before seventh glass, he barely finished eating before a ranker knocked on the door and announced that Major Zhelan had returned.

"Tell him I'll be right there." Quaeryt turned to Vaelora. "I might be back in less than a quint … or I might not be back until close to ninth glass."

"Try not to be late. Those factors might not appreciate facing me without you there."

"Skarpa wouldn't mind."

"Go!"

Quaeryt grinned, then left and hurried down the steps.

Zhelan was waiting in the hallway between the staircase and the doors to the plaques rooms. "You were right, sir. About the canal boat."

"What did they find?"

"Twenty kegs of dried elveweed, some ten half kegs of a tannish powder. They were sealed with wax, but I thought we should open one. When I slit the wax and pried it open, the factor's guard started babbling that he didn't know."

Quaeryt shook his head. "I'd wager that it's curamyn. That's a powder that they have pleasure girls snort … or so I'm told. Another Otelyrnan drug. Not that I've actually seen it, but I'm told it's quite expensive."

Zhelan nodded. "There was also a chamber with a heavy lock. It had eight narrow bunks in it, and very small portholes."

Quaeryt could guess who would have been quartered there.

"To what factor does it belong?"

"The warehouse guard said both the boat and the warehouse belonged to Factor Aelsam."

"The one who wasn't with the others because he had the flux," mused Quaeryt. "Did you find him?"

"No, sir. He and his son left in their wagon yesterday afternoon. He's a widower, and his daughter lives elsewhere, according to the steward. He was so upset that we put guards around the house, and quite a dwelling it is, too, sir … one that you might inspect, sir."

Two "sirs" in the same sentence indicated more than a suggestion.

"Is it far? We're supposed to meet with the factors' council at ninth glass. With those factors we've been able to find, that is."

"Less than a quint's ride to the north, sir. I have a squad standing by." After a slight pause, Zhelan added, "There were two other strange things. The first one was that last night a boy came up and told me that he'd been given a silver to tell me that the submarshal should look in the canal boat below the locks."

"He didn't know who had told him, I assume?"

"Just a man with a raspy voice and a cloak with a hood that covered his face."

"So someone wanted us to inspect the boat. What else?"

"Undercaptain Voltyr did remove the iron plate that kept the lock unable to open. You asked us to seek out smiths who might have worked on the canal. We couldn't find all of them last night, but the two we did talk to hadn't worked on the canal. The third one wasn't at his smithy. This morning, the patrollers found him in the alley behind The Brass Tankard. His head had been bashed and his throat cut." The major offered a crooked smile. "The canal lockmaster can't be found, either."

"That doesn't surprise me, unfortunately." *He was likely either part of the plot or dead, if not both. But which plot?* It was more than clear to Quaeryt that there had been more than one set of plotters. "We'd better go now."

"I did take the liberty of having your mare saddled, in the event you wished to inspect the dwelling."

Quaeryt couldn't help but smile at that. "Thank you, Zhelan. That will save some time." He couldn't help but wonder if that was a harbinger of things to come.

Both the squad and Quaeryt's mare were waiting in the courtyard just beyond the north porch to the inn, as was Zhelan's mount. Quaeryt mounted quickly, although he fumbled slightly when he took the reins in his left hand because the two lower fingers still didn't respond. *Will they ever heal fully?* He had the sense that they wouldn't,

but he could hope.

Early as it was on Solayi morning, the main street heading north from the Canal Inn was largely deserted, and all the shops remained shuttered. The eastern sky held a silvery haze that had begun to fade into thin off-white shreds of clouds. In the quiet of the early morning, the clopping of the horses' hooves echoed off the fronts of the shops, but faded as the riders moved northward, where the small houses were set farther back from the street. After they had ridden not quite a mille, they passed two stone pillars, signifying the edge of the town proper. On the right were cots with small plots, and on the left, an open expanse of overgrazed pasture.

"The factor's place is up on the left, sir, behind that wall," Zhelan said quietly.

Quaeryt looked farther north. After what Zhelan had told him about the contents of the canal boat, Quaeryt had expected a large dwelling. He had not expected one that was the size of a High Holder's hold house, if one of the smaller hold houses. The wall was of the dull red brick, close to three yards high, without any openings, except for the heavy black iron gates, through which Quaeryt, Zhelan, and the squad rode, after the troopers on duty had swung the gates open.

The three-story dwelling was also of brick, but the window ledges, cornices, and the tops of the low walls at the edge of the porches that surrounded the three-story dwelling were of gray stone. The roof tiles were of a light gray slate, and the wide windows had shutters painted a dark green. The dwelling itself ran nearly a hundred yards from end to end. The roof of the receiving portico on the south side of the three-story dwelling extended over the area where carriages would halt to discharge their passengers. In addition to the stable, there were two other blocklike buildings set farther behind the mansion, behind a large walled garden.

"Rather impressive for a factor," observed Quaeryt dryly.

"I thought so myself, sir."

Quaeryt dismounted under the portico, as did Zhelan, and the two walked up the gray stone steps to where two troopers stood stationed beside the door from the portico into the mansion. The brasswork on the door gleamed, and light shone through the narrow stained-glass windows flanking the wide single door.

Quaeryt lifted the brass knocker and let it fall.

The door opened, and a narrow-faced man in dark green livery peered out. "What do-" He stopped when he saw the uniforms, then swallowed, and said, "Yes?"

"We're going to need to look through the house, since it appears that Factor Aelsam is not here," said Quaeryt pleasantly.

"Sir … that is … most unusual."

"The times and circumstances are most unusual. You are?"

"Dallaen, sir. The steward."

"Excellent," said Quaeryt cheerfully. "You can show us through the dwelling."

The steward opened the door, reluctantly, and stepped back to allow the two officers to enter, his head slightly down. His eyes took in Quaeryt's ungloved hands and flickered, widening as he got a better look. Then he swallowed.

The side entry hall was a square five yards on a side with an off-white plaster ceiling a good yard above Quaeryt's head. The walls were finished in a pale green silklike paper that stretched from dark floor moldings to the crown moldings framing the green tinted off-white ceiling. Immediately beyond the entry along the wide corridor that ran the length of the house were a pair of studies, a lady's study on the right and across from it a much larger library and study. Both were furnished with various pieces of polished goldenwork in a spare style that was far more to Quaeryt's taste than the ornate furnishings in the hold house of the late Paitrak.

A lady's study? For a widower? Or is it for a mistress? Quaeryt said nothing, but let Dallaen show them the rest of the main floor, which held a large dining chamber with a long goldenwood table and matching chairs, the adjoining salon, and a pair of parlors, or perhaps a parlor and a morning room off the smaller front entry to the mansion. Then came a breakfast room, and opposite it a music room with a clavecin and several settees and chairs upholstered in a pale green silk. Beyond the music room was another study, small and dark paneled, with but a small writing desk and a table … and a green hanging in the middle of the side wall.

Quaeryt walked over to the hanging and drew it aside to reveal a heavy brassbound door with a brass-plated keyhole for a built-in lock. He looked to Dallaen. "Please open the door."

"I can't, sir. Only the master and the young master have keys."

"Are you certain?"

"Oh, yes, sir. They never let anyone have the keys to either this door or the outside door to the lower level."

"Have you ever been down there, Dallaen?" asked Quaeryt.

"Only in the lower study, sir, the chamber at the bottom of the steps."

"What else is down there?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. There's another locked door that leads to the rest of the lower level. That was what the master said."

Quaeryt had his doubts about the accuracy of Dallaen's words, but let that pass. "Then, I guess we'll have to let ourselves in."

"The door is iron-backed, sir. I would hope that you would not create great destruction."

Quaeryt smiled. "So do I." He looked at the door and concentrated on imaging away a thin section from the top to the bottom on the side facing the lock. Then he tried the lever handle. It depressed and the door opened.

Dallaen's mouth opened and shut silently.

"Shall we see what lies below, Major? Please follow me."

"Yes, sir."

Holding full shields, Quaeryt stepped down on the first step-and found himself hurled backward into the iron doorjamb. *Frig! You should have thought about traps.* He straightened, ignoring the soreness in his shoulder, and looked at the still-vibrating and massive morning star that had swung down out of a concealed recess in the staircase ceiling.

He stepped back into the rear hallway and looked at Dallaen.

All the color had drained from the functionary's face.

"I think you should precede us down the stairs," Quaeryt said quietly.

"Sir … I beg you … please … I knew nothing."

"Down the steps."

Dallaen glanced from Quaeryt to the morning star and back to Quaeryt, then shuffled to the steps and began to descend, turning his body to pass the suspended weapon. Quaeryt followed, with Zhelan behind him.

The windowless and stone-walled chamber at the bottom of the steps contained a single writing desk with one side against the wall, two wooden chairs, one set behind the desk, and a bronze lamp in a wall sconce above the side of the desk, all barely illuminated by the light from the room at the top of the stairs. Quaeryt imaged the lamp into light, surveying the room as he turned up the wick for more illumination. As Dallaen had said, there was another door, ironbound and secured by both a heavy padlock running through iron hoops and another in-door lock.

"You have no idea what lies behind this door?" Quaeryt's voice was soft.

"I've heard voices, at times, sir. Women's voices," Dallaen admitted in a resigned tone.

"And you've sent down food?"

"Yes, sir. But only to one of the factor's guards. Usually, it's Wharfyl."

"Where is Wharfyl now?"

"He left with the master."

I'll wager he did. Quaeryt saw no point in questioning the steward

more at the moment since he already had a good idea what he faced. Instead, he stepped to the door and imaged away the padlock hasp and the iron-edged part of the door where the lock bolt had to be. Then he opened the door. A sour odor assaulted him when he stepped through the door, only to see a second door less than a yard beyond the first. The second door had no locks, only a heavy latch, but when he pushed open that door, the odor became far stronger. There was no light in the second room, except that seeping through from behind him, but that was enough for him to make out the four women-scarcely more than girls, he thought, chained to iron rings set in the stone walls. All were naked, and all were cringing back against the stone, their faces averted.

"… Namer-frigged bastard…" muttered Zhelan from behind Quaeryt.

"… please … no more…"

"… do anything…"

The pleading murmurs from the girls were desultory, the tone of faded desperation.

Quaeryt spied the single wall lamp and image-lit it. As the faint light filled the chamber, he saw that there were five unused rings set in the wall. He also saw that each girl wore a harness with a lock in the back that connected the chain from the wall ring to the harness.

One of the girls squinted at Quaeryt. "Sir … please!"

"We'll have you free in a moment."

"… just another trick…" That murmur was so low Quaeryt couldn't tell which of the four had uttered it.

"Zhelan … escort the steward upstairs and have him provide blankets for the girls. We'll worry about garments after I get them out of here. If he shows the slightest inclination to be less than cooperative, run him through."

"Sir … I didn't know…" protested the steward.

"Sowshit!" snapped Quaeryt. "I don't want to hear another word. Get those blankets."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt's head was aching faintly by the time he'd imaged away the harness locks and guided the trembling girls up the steps into the study, where Zhelan immediately wrapped a blanket around each girl.

Leaving the four stunned and trembling girls in the main floor study, Quaeryt drew Zhelan out into the corridor.

Zhelan was silent until Quaeryt closed the door to the study. "The fellow is more than…" The major seemed unable to come up with a word adequate to describe the missing factor. "He just left them to starve … to die."

"He might not have. He might have thought that we'd move on

and he could return."

"He had to know that might not happen."

Quaeryt nodded. "That's possible. I need to leave all this in your hands. Get them fed, washed up and clothed … and keep them safe."

"Yes, sir. What about the house staff?"

Quaeryt shook his head. "For now, keep them all here. Except Dallaen. Tie him up. He, of any of them, should have known. I need to think about this."

"Sir?"

"We're not justicers." *Not anymore.* "But I don't trust the locals to handle it, either."

The major nodded sadly.

Quaeryt left Zhelan at the mansion, as well as all but two troopers of the squad that had accompanied him, to deal with the factor's mansion staff and former captives. As he rode south along the road that led back to the Canal Inn, he thought about what he'd just discovered. There weren't any laws that he knew of that prohibited girls from becoming pleasure women, and even in Tilbor parents could sell their daughters-or sons-into indenture for up to five years.

What Aelsam had done went far beyond that, but … in any justicing hearing, he would doubtless claim, and the locals would likely support that assertion, that he had only been disciplining girls who had refused to live up to the terms of their indenture. Quaeryt hadn't seen any bruises or welts or cuts on the girls when he'd freed them, not that he'd looked closely, and he suspected that less obvious means had been used on the girls. Three of them had looked dazed, and he couldn't help but wonder how much curamyn had been in their food. But, again, feeding them curamyn wasn't against any law he knew. *Despicable … but not against the law.*

Even if he persuaded Bhayar to decree changes in the law, how long would it be before such changes were accepted by the factors and High Holders? And even if he were successful in setting up the imagers as a force, it would be years … if not longer … before they could make significant changes. *It will be hard enough to get compliance with what laws there are now.*

He was still thinking about what he might be able to do when he walked into the larger plaques room of the Canal Inn, where Vaelora and Skarpa waited.

"I was wondering, dearest, if you were going to return in time."

"There was another … difficulty." Quaeryt paused, then went on. "Zhelan sensed that there was something … unusual … about Factor Aelsam's dwelling. He suggested an inspection might be in order. It was." Quaeryt went on to describe what he had found.

"He had those girls chained up?" asked Vaelora.

“He did. Zhelan is arranging for them to be brought here to the inn. I don’t know what we’ll do, but I don’t think they want to go to the pleasure houses or wherever Aelsam had in mind for them.”

“Variana, I would imagine,” said Vaelora tartly.

“What I don’t understand is why the canal boat was left,” said Skarpa.

Quaeryt laughed. “The good factor Aelsam had two warehouses, one on each side of the locks. The one to the west of the locks likely held grain that he bought cheaply from growers whose shipments were held up when the lock was closed for repairs. The one on the east was for goods destined for Variana in times both good and bad-for either Rex Kharst’s pleasures or for the pleasure houses catering to a more wealthy clientele. But when Aelsam discovered an army was coming, everything was reversed, and he ran out of time, and he certainly couldn’t have escaped us heading east, especially since he would have had the only boat for more than twenty milles. I’d guess that one of his enemies hired the smith, for a goodly amount of golds, to forge-weld the canal lock just so that Aelsam couldn’t move his more luxurious goods back west. I also suspect that enemy was one of the factors on the council, most likely one of the two whom we didn’t pick up, because they knew who Zhelan was and that he could get word to the submarshal. The two we have in custody know that, but they haven’t had a chance to talk to anyone else.”

“And anyone else who could tell us is dead,” concluded Vaelora.

Quaeryt nodded. “But I’m certain that Aelsam is accompanied by a considerable amount of gold, and likely headed west.”

“Not downriver?” asked Skarpa, who immediately shook his head. “No, he’d have guessed that we’d have to take a large force south.”

“We can’t chase him west, but there may be some things we can do to make sure he can’t return to Laaryn,” said Quaeryt. “We’ll have to talk about those later.”

Vaelora gave Quaeryt a look that told him he would be explaining a great deal later.

The bells had not finished chiming ninth glass when Major Aernyt, an officer Quaeryt did not personally know, ushered the four remaining members of the factors’ council into the plaques room, led by the narrow-faced Coryt. The stout gray-bearded Barkudan was last, and that meant the two in the middle were Yudrow and Fuadan.

“You can just stand before the table,” said Quaeryt.

“It is most … untoward … to be summoned to a hearing on a Solayi morning,” the stout Barkudan said in a quietly aggrieved tone.

“It was most untoward for you to have a city councilor lie to a submarshal,” replied Quaeryt. “It was most untoward for you to attack me.”

“All of that was a grievous misunderstanding,” said the sallow brown-haired factor smoothly. “Had we but known…”

“You are?” asked Skarpa.

“Yudrow D’Factorius, Submarshal.” Yudrow inclined his head politely. “We received no word about the approach of your forces. Nor did we receive any instructions that our past practices were no longer to be sanctioned by Lord Bhayar. Had we but known-”

“We attempted to let you know,” said Skarpa dryly. “I would have thought that the approach of an army would have been sufficient to convey that matters had changed. Instead, you all immediately lied. Two of you tried to kill a Telaryn senior officer who had not even lifted arms against you. One of your number fled.”

“Now that we know, sir,” added the black-haired and green-eyed Fuadan, “we will certainly comply with all laws and rules you and Lord Bhayar specify.”

The implication there is that they shouldn’t have to comply until they are told. Quaeryt wanted to snort. *Since when is shooting at authority allowed once the war is over?*

Skarpa smiled. “Please explain why you lied to me and fired upon Commander Quaeryt.” His eyes fixed on Barkudan.

“Sir…”

Quaeryt image-projected the feeling that more dissembling might well lead to executions.

A sheen of perspiration began to appear on the stout factor’s forehead. Finally, he continued. “Sir … there … is no explanation save that we did not know what to expect. The fact that we could not even come up with a good explanation is proof enough of our confusion.”

“Would you have lied or fired upon Rex Kharst’s officers?” pressed Skarpa.

“I could not say, sir. In my entire life, I have never seen such.”

“You’ve never seen a Bovarian officer?”

“Not in Laaryn, sir. I have in Ephra and in Variana, but never here.”

“What about the rest of you?” interjected Quaeryt.

“No, sir.”

“Never, sir.”

“How have you paid your tariffs to Rex Kharst?” asked Quaeryt, ignoring the puzzled look from Skarpa.

“As always,” replied Barkudan. “The factors’ council receives them from all crafters, merchants, and growers in Laaryn and the surrounding area. We send them with guards by canal boat to Variana by the end of Feuillyt every year.”

“Do the tariffs from the High Holders go on the same boat?”

“Of course. It would be a waste to send two boats.”

"Is this the same method used in most of Bovaria?"

"I believe so."

"Who checks the tariffs for the rex?"

"If the regional tariffs don't match the yearly requirement, the head of the factors' council can be executed. That happened once eleven years ago. If the discrepancy is great, all can be executed. High Holders can lose all or part of their holding if they fail to meet their tariffs. They also can be executed."

That explains a great deal … and it's going to make Bhayar's life-and yours-a lot harder. "You sent your tariffs this year?"

"Of course, sir. We dared not do otherwise."

"And you'll keep sending them to Lord Bhayar?"

"We wouldn't think otherwise."

"Do any of you have any questions or anything else to say?" asked Quaeryt.

The four exchanged glances, then all shook their heads.

Quaeryt glanced to Skarpa and then to Vaelora. "I'd suggest we excuse the factors and review what we know. When we come to a decision, we'll summon them back."

Vaelora nodded. After a moment, so did Skarpa.

"Major … if you'd escort the factors out," said Quaeryt.

Once the plaques-room door closed, Skarpa looked to Quaeryt. "Why did you stop questioning them?"

"Because what they said changes everything. Much as I dislike the way they run Laaryn, they largely behaved as they had been told by Kharst. Aelsam is another story, and he knows it. That's why he fled. It's also why one of them made sure that the canal locks couldn't be opened quickly and why Zhelan was informed about Aelsam and his boat." Quaeryt coughed to clear his throat. "We can't afford to kill off or punish the people who are collecting tariffs just because we don't like the way Kharst governed. Bhayar will have to decide how to change matters once he understands exactly what's going on, but it's not our job to make those changes." He looked to Vaelora. "What do you think?"

She shook her head. "Kharst only cared about the tariffs. So long as the locals and the High Holders paid, they could do what they wanted. It's no wonder the factors closed the canal to keep prices up. Still … we need to discuss some sort of token tariff for the factors, the same thing that Bhayar imposed on the High Holders, only not as much. Golds are all they seem to understand."

Quaeryt nodded.

"It also explains about the roads," mused Quaeryt. "The rex has never worried about them. Most of the trade has been by water. The lack of good roads is another reason why Kharst wanted to control the

River Aluse all the way to the southern Gulf."

"His father built the Great Canal," Vaelora pointed out, "and he finished it."

"Only because he had to," Quaeryt countered, "because of Chayar's tariffs on Bovarian traders using the River Aluse. He likely used prisoners and impressed the poor, and it was cheaper and faster than using the roads."

"But … how could he convince people to pay the tariffs?" asked Skarpa.

"Remember the crossbowmen? The ones who tried to kill us?"

"Oh … they were used to assassinate any recalcitrant High Holder, weren't they?"

"Exactly. And with the factors largely running the towns…"

"Most High Holders couldn't afford to raise large numbers of armsmen or build an impregnable chateau," concluded Skarpa. "That meant that Kharst could turn his army against the few who did have those kinds of resources. And Telaryn and Khel."

Quaeryt nodded. "It's not the way I'd run a land, but it appears to have worked for Kharst and his predecessors … although I suspect that Khel was plundered pretty thoroughly after Kharst conquered it. He probably intended the same for Telaryn."

"So what do we do about the factors' council?" asked Vaelora tartly. "Let them off with token tariffs and a feathered lash?"

"No. I'd suggest that we also make them pay in other ways, where it pains them the most," replied Quaeryt. "They will have to supply us fully for the journey downriver, with additional flatboats as well, as well as support the force we leave here to keep order. I would suggest you leave Subcommander Meinyt and Fifth Regiment, with him as the acting regional governor … unless you want to leave Commander Kharllon."

"I doubt Myskyl and Deucalon would approve of that," said Skarpa wryly. "Or of leaving Meinyt. That would leave me with one less regiment."

"We may be able to remedy that," said Quaeryt, thinking about the likelihood that he would never have the ships to transport two regiments, no matter what Bhayar had promised.

"How?"

"I'd rather not say. It is possible."

"Possible or not, what about Bhayar?"

"Do it subject to Lord Bhayar's approval. Send a courier, notifying him of your action and the reason why. Vaelora and I will send separate missives supporting that. Then say that if he feels a short occupation by Fifth Regiment is sufficient, he can order Subcommander Meinyt to move downriver and rejoin you at Ephra.

Or, if he agrees with our recommendations, he can confirm Subcommander Meinyt as the temporary regional governor." Quaeryt paused, then added, "I think we should leave Meinyt two imager undercaptains. And I intend to detach two for your use with Southern Army as well." Quaeryt could see Vaelora nod, if only slightly.

Skarpa frowned. "Will Meinyt really need imagers?"

"He may not, but I want the Bovarians to learn about them, and to see their abilities. There will be times when they will be useful in resolving problems with less use of weapons."

"I can see that, but the regiment business…" Skarpa smiled. "I won't wager against you, not ever."

Let's just hope my feelings are right about this.

"I'll send for Meinyt, and you can brief him here later." Skarpa paused. "You know Kharllon will say something."

"Just tell him what I know you would anyway."

Skarpa raised his eyebrows.

"That he's the only seasoned full commander that you have, and that Meinyt's already dealt with patrolling duties."

"You know me too well. What about you?" asked Skarpa. "Will you have enough imagers for your mission in Khel?"

"That will still leave me four, and that should be more than sufficient in dealing with the High Council. Oh … and we can declare Aelsam an outlaw, subject to immediate execution, with all his golds, goods, and property forfeit."

Even after that, it took the three another quint to agree on the exact terms and to wait for the factors to return.

When the four factors stood again before the table, Quaeryt let the silence draw out for more than just a few moments before declaring, "The decision will be announced by Lady Vaelora Chayardyr, Lord Bhayar's sister and envoy."

Vaelora studied the four, one at a time. Finally, she spoke.

"I will not pretend that I am pleased with either your actions or your behavior, but much of that behavior resulted from the demands and lack of care on the part of the previous ruler of Bovaria. For that reason, what is required of you is this. First, each full factor who is a member of the factors' council will remit, without delay, a token tariff of ten golds to Lord Bhayar. Every other factor will remit five golds, and the council will submit a listing of each factor and his payment. If, by chance, any factor is not listed, then each member of the factors' council will be required, during the next annual payment of tariffs, to remit an additional ten golds for each missing factor." Vaelora paused, letting the weight of those words sink in. "Second, you are not to close the Great Canal for any reason other than repairs. Such repairs will be made expeditiously. Third, for your acts in failing to receive Southern

Army and for your attempted deception, you will provide the following reparations. You will supply, without recompense, all provisions and equipment required by Southern Army. You will provide whatever number of flatboats for use by Southern Army is required by Submarshal Skarpa. Such boats will be left at Ephra or elsewhere for your recovery only when Southern Army has no further need of them. We will also be leaving a regiment to assure compliance with that and to assure that order is maintained in Laaryn. You will supply that regiment, without recompense, until Lord Bhayar determines otherwise.

"For his considerable crimes, Factor Aelsam's life is forfeit. His golds, property, and goods will revert to Lord Bhayar, and his dwelling and grounds will become the headquarters for the Telaryn regiment that will remain in Laaryn to keep order. If you fail to keep these terms, or leave Laaryn to avoid fulfilling them, your lives and all that you or your families possess are forfeit." Vaelora paused, then added, "So be it, in the name of Bhayar, Lord of Telaryn and Bovaria."

"So be it," added Quaeryt, his voice quietly firm, image-projecting the sense of absolute authority and certainty.

The four factors shuddered slightly. So did the major, standing by the plaques-room door.

"That will be all," announced Quaeryt.

The three at the table watched silently as the factors and Major Aernyt filed out of the chamber.

16

The remainder of Solayi promised to be uneventful, if busy, for Quaeryt. Once the three finished with the hearing, Quaeryt and Skarpa met to work out what supplies would be necessary while Vaelora wrote out a record of the hearing and the findings to include with the dispatch Quaeryt would be sending to Bhayar, including the reasons for the "token" tariffs, and a suggestion that it be applied to other factors besides those in Laaryn. Next, while she talked with the girls rescued from Aelsam's cellar prison, Quaeryt summoned the imager undercaptains to the Canal Inn, where they met in the smaller plaques room.

He stood before the circular table, waiting until all eight undercaptains had entered and stood silently. Only then did he speak.

"I'm sure all of you know what has happened here in Laaryn, but to make sure that there's no misunderstanding, I'm going to go over a few things. The most important of these is something that you all have experienced, but we haven't talked much about it directly. That is the fact that Bovaria has been governed very differently from Telaryn. Rex Kharst and his predecessors demanded comparatively less of factors and High Holders than does Lord Bhayar, but in those matters that were important to the rex, absolute obedience was demanded, and failure to comply meant loss of everything, and most often death…" From there, Quaeryt explained how that had led to the situation in Laaryn. "… because this city is critical to trade and control of the southwest of old Bovaria, we have decided that, at least for a time, one of Submarshal Skarpa's regiments will remain here, and I will be detaching two imager undercaptains to support Subcommander Meinyt and Fifth Regiment. Once we reach Ephra, I will be assigning two others to support Submarshal Skarpa and Southern Army." Quaeryt paused and looked over the imagers. "Those of you who are detached have a great responsibility-to me, to Lord Bhayar, and to yourselves. You must conduct yourselves with the full awareness that not only your future but that of all imagers in Lydar rests on your conduct and your success. That does not mean concealing your abilities, but using them wisely in support of your commander. Wisely, but not excessively.

"The two undercaptains who will be assigned to Subcommander Meinyt are Undercaptain Desyrk and Undercaptain Smaethyl. Desyrk will be in charge and all imaging acts must be with his knowledge and approval, except in combat situations where that is not possible. I will make the decision on which imagers will support Southern Army once we reach Ephra." Quaeryt paused, then asked, "Any questions?"

"Why'd you pick Desyrk, begging your pardon, sir?" asked Threkhyl.

Always trying to stir the pot and make trouble. Quaeryt smiled. "Because his talents suit Subcommander Meinyt's needs, Undercaptain. I always try to fit the task to the capabilities, and Undercaptain Desyrk has shown that he can maintain his composure under all sorts of stress, especially the stress required in the kind of situations likely to occur here in Laaryn. I'd be happy to discuss your strengths and capabilities privately, if you so desire. Any other questions?"

"What about Ephra?" asked Voltyr.

"Nothing new. You may recall that, several years back, Autarch Aliaro had his imagers and his cannoneers blockade Ephra. That lasted several months, until Rex Kharst used the River Laar to send troopers downstream. He landed them in Kephria and fired the port quarter there."

"They didn't go to war?" asked Horan.

"Kharst was still engaged in fighting in Khel. Aliaro was angry because some of the Bovarian forces along the border with Antiago had harassed Antiagon traders and confiscated their goods. He figured that Kharst didn't want to fight two different wars. Kharst didn't, but he did deliver a warning."

"Why didn't Aliaro attack?"

"He did use imagers against the Bovarian troopers and imagers and killed the attackers in Kephria. That was bad enough from Kharst's point of view that he let it go. Aliaro didn't do more because the Antiagons' strengths are more defensive. They've developed their imagers and Antiagon Fire, and a huge wall encircles Kephria, except for the side on the River Laar. Now that Kharst is dead, there's no telling what Aliaro might do." Seeing that there were no more questions, Quaeryt said, "That's all for now. Desyrk … if you'd remain."

Once the others had left, Quaeryt pulled two chairs out from the table, gestured for the undercaptain to sit, then seated himself.

After seating himself, Desyrk looked at Quaeryt. "Sir … if I might ask…"

"Why I selected you and Smaethyl?" Quaeryt smiled. "Because you're levelheaded and competent, and Smaethyl's a strong imager who will listen to you. I could be wrong, but I think any imaging required in Laaryn is within your capabilities, even without Smaethyl, but your safety as an imager is greatly enhanced by having another imager undercaptain with you. So is the impression of imager presence. You can project a shield somewhat, I know. There may be times when you should accompany the subcommander closely…"

"To keep people from attacking him, you mean?"

"It's better to prevent an attack with locals than to allow it and have to kill people in order to maintain authority," Quaeryt explained quietly.

Desyrk nodded. "I can see that, sir. You've shown that."

And I've also killed more people than I should have, far more, because of what I didn't know. "I also want you to brief Smaethyl. I'm having you do it, because that reinforces your position and authority." Quaeryt looked at Desyrk. "One other thing. If you and Smaethyl come across young imagers, and they and their parents are willing, take them on as apprentices."

"Sir?"

"As Voltyr may have told you, I'm interested in what will happen to all imagers in Lydar, both now and in the future. If we are successful in dealing with Khel and possibly Antiago, Lord Bhayar has agreed to let us have the isle of piers for a scholarium of imagers and scholars. We need to gather as many imagers as possible, but not through force."

"If anyone can assure that, you can. I'll keep my eyes open." Desyrk paused.

From there Quaeryt went on to reinforce specifics of what he expected of Desyrk.

A quint later, when Desyrk had left, Quaeryt went to see if Meinyt had arrived, only to find him in the public room. Quaeryt decided to join the older officer there, gesturing to the server. "A pale lager, if you would."

Her eyes took in the collar insignia. "Yes, sir."

Then Quaeryt slid into the chair across the square oak table from Meinyt. "Thank you for coming here. Things have been a little … hurried."

The grizzled subcommander barked a laugh. "They always are around you. Skarpa said I'd be holding down this area with Fifth Regiment and that you had a present of sorts for me."

"I wouldn't call it that. I'm detaching two imagers to report directly to you."

"Which two?" Meinyt's voice was wary.

"Desyrk and Smaethyl. Desyrk's the senior … very levelheaded."

"Heard good things about him."

Quaeryt waited as the server neared and set down a beaker of the pale lager. He set three coppers on the table. The server nodded and scooped them up. Quaeryt took a slow swallow to ease a throat dry from talking.

"Why imagers here?"

"They can be useful in situations where force would be awkward.

They're very good at opening locked buildings without making messes, and providing certain kinds of protection."

"The way things that should have wounded you never seemed to reach you?"

"Something like that. Desyrk probably couldn't stop an attack of massed crossbows or muskets, but should be able to handle single weapons."

"That might be handy."

"Especially in dealing with recalcitrant factors or High Holders."

"You know I'm not good at politely telling people to do what they should."

"You're polite enough, and having a regiment behind you should mean that they'll have to be polite. If they're not … well … things could happen to them. After all, you do have to establish and maintain Bhayar's authority. Quietly and gently, if possible."

"He said something like that," Meinyt said with a wry smile. "Why did you pick me?"

"It was Skarpa's decision in the end."

"You suggested me, didn't you? Why?"

"Because you're honest, loyal, trustworthy, and good at whatever you do. And you have a good feel for things."

"I'm supposed to live up to all that?" Meinyt's tone was wry.

"You have so far. Now you have to while surrounded by corrupt factors and sleazy High Holders."

"I knew you'd be trouble the day you pulled a crossbow bolt out of your chest and rode back to base without collapsing."

"I should have listened more carefully to you. I wouldn't have been hit in the first place."

"You had to get hit. That way, I can tell every junior officer and ranker that even commanders get wounded and survive and that they've got no cause to bitch." Meinyt grinned.

"Just for that, I'll hope that there are some local beauties who are attracted to a subcommander."

"I've seen what you've done for your lady. Don't wish that on an old subcommander."

Quaeryt couldn't help but laugh, and Meinyt joined him.

When Quaeryt finished with Meinyt-and his lager-he set out to check the canal. The rest of his day was consumed with minor activities of all sorts.

By the time he and Vaelora had eaten a late supper with Skarpa in the smaller plaques room and then retired to their chamber upstairs, Quaeryt was trying to stifle yawns.

Vaelora checked the bolt on the door and turned to Quaeryt. "What did you decide about that horrible steward?"

"The one who insisted he knew nothing?"

"He had to know!"

"I'm certain he did. That doesn't mean he could do anything about it. Zhelan and I decided that he and the housekeeper, who also had to know, will be exiled from Laaryn, and that they'll be allowed to take nothing. If they return, they'll face floggings and branding. The others will lose their positions when Meinyt takes over the mansion as the regimental headquarters."

"You're being too easy on him."

"How do we prove he knew? I could flog and execute all the factors in the town on those grounds. The only thing we can do that's practical is have Meinyt here to change things."

"I know, dearest." She sighed. "You're right. I don't have to like it, though."

"What did you find out from the girls?" Quaeryt sat on the straight-backed chair, letting Vaelora prop herself up in a sitting position on the bed, with her legs stretched out.

"They'd been kept there for over a month, more like two, and they were only fed when they did what Aelsam wanted." Vaelora's voice was cold.

"What he wanted were acts expected of women in pleasure houses?"

"What else? The longer they were there, the more often they had to perform."

"Then he had to be giving his guards their favors." *And that meant Dallaen and others definitely had to know, not that you didn't suspect that all along.*

"Or others. The girls have no idea who, only that it seemed endless. They've been drugged. With curamyn, I'd suspect, to get them to associate sex with pleasure … or forgetfulness. I wish you'd caught Aelsam."

"It might be for the best that he fled."

"How can you possibly say that?" Anger colored her words.

"Because his life is forfeit because he fled. In either Bovaria or Telaryn, drugging indentured girls to induce them to do their chores is not against any law. Nor is requiring them to serve in a pleasure house. The most he might have been charged with is cruelty and battery-and that *might* require loss of a hand and a large penalty payment."

"That's all?" Vaelora's voice held a mixture of aghast amazement and iron anger. "That's it? For what he's done to so many? I can't believe it."

Quaeryt smiled sadly. In some ways, Vaelora was still far too innocent. "Even High Holders' wives can be punished by their

husbands without legal recourse under the High Holders' low justice. Do you think indentured servants would be treated better?"

"But they were held captive."

"He would have claimed he was disciplining them for failing to carry out their duties as pleasure girls."

"You could have done something."

"I could. If he'd remained in Laaryn, I could have set it up so that he attacked me, and killed him in self-defense. Even were I a justicer, I couldn't have sentenced him to execution. Not without risking being disciplined by Bhayar for exceeding my authority. Why do you think there are some things I've done about which no one knows anything?"

Vaelora sighed. "I don't like to think about that, either. It's terrible that so much of what Aelsam did isn't considered wrong."

"Most people would think it wrong, but the law doesn't," Quaeryt pointed out. "Especially the way Kharst viewed ruling. All this is just another example of all the changes Bhayar will have to make, and why uniting Telaryn and Bovaria will be anything but easy."

"Do you think putting Khel under Bhayar's rule will be as bad?"

"No. Pharsi laws are closer to those in Telaryn. I just hope we can get their High Council to see it that way." He paused. "Do you have any ideas about what to do with the girls?"

"I've talked to them about what else they can do. I've also talked to the innkeeper's wife. I'll try to find places for them. One of them, the little blonde, I worry about her, especially."

"Every time we try to make something better, there's more to worry about." Quaeryt shook his head.

"You need to worry about getting some sleep," Vaelora suggested.

"Sleep?" asked Quaeryt dryly, looking intently at her.

"Sleep," she said firmly … but her face softened after the single word.

Quaeryt blushed.

17

Much as Quaeryt worried about spending the time, early on Lundi morning he and Vaelora-supported by first company and second company from Nineteenth Regiment-set out from the Canal Inn to pay a visit to one High Holder Delauck, the closest High Holder, whose hold was some twelve milles north and, unsurprisingly to Quaeryt from what he had learned over the past few days, more than a mille east of the river.

"Why?" Skarpa had asked.

"Why not?" Quaeryt had replied. "We won't be ready to leave until tomorrow, and I need some questions answered. They're questions I didn't know enough to ask until yesterday."

"You think High Holders here are different, don't you?"

"They're not different, except more arrogant-in general-but I think their position is much different. If I'm right, that will affect how Bhayar has to deal with them." *And how the imagers will, as well.*

After riding for more than two glasses through a cold mist that occasionally turned to a drizzle, Quaeryt couldn't help but have second thoughts about his impulsive decision to see Delauck, especially if the High Holder didn't happen to be available. *Still … you could learn something from his steward and the staff.*

"Is that it?" asked Vaelora, pointing eastward toward a pair of stone pillars set at the side of the muddy road several hundred yards ahead.

Quaeryt could make out a graveled lane that led from the pillars at an angle up a rocky hillside to a walled structure on the north end of the hill. The hold house resembled Quaeryt's concept of the hold of an ancient Yaran warlord-a stone structure perched on top of a rocky rugged hill, reached only by a winding narrow road, crossing at least two wooden bridges. Yet the lands to the west, through which they had just ridden, were wide and sweeping, and clearly fertile. "I'd guess so, but we'll see shortly."

Less than half a quint later, they reined up at the foot of the high rocky hill. "Chateau Delauck" read the letters chiseled into the stone pillars flanking the narrow lane.

"You can't put more than two men abreast on that road," said Zhelan. "I'd wager that there's no other way up, either."

"That's not a wager I'd take," replied Quaeryt, turning to Vaelora. "What do you think?"

"There's no point in wasting a day. At the least, you can make him an example."

"My thoughts as well." Quaeryt gestured to Zhelan. "We need to

send some scouts up the road. It's likely designed with weak points. As soon as they reach one of those places, I'll have the imagers strengthen it. Imagers forward!"

Once the imagers had ridden forward, Quaeryt began to explain. "We're here to visit High Holder Delauck, and I think we'll offer him a few tokens of goodwill." Quaeryt wiped his forehead and adjusted his very damp visor cap. "We'll need to improve the lane to his hold, and turn some of the rickety spans I can see into good stone bridges."

They'd no more than started up the hillside than one of the scouts returned.

"Sir … there's a gap in the road, a yard wide and a third of a yard deep."

To slow wagons or carts or fast-riding armsmen. Quaeryt nodded and called back, "Desyrk."

Once Desyrk had imaged stone pavement in place, the climb continued, for another fifty yards, to a wooden span across a gap dug out of the hillside.

This time, Quaeryt summoned Threkhyl. "If you would see what you could do."

"Yes, sir." Threkhyl looked both irritated and puzzled as he eased his mount around Vaelora's gelding and then Quaeryt's mare.

Behind him, Khalis suppressed a smile, as did Lhandor.

The imagers dealt with two short wooden spans, strengthening the roadbed and creating solid stone bridges, and the column rode forward, for a hundred yards or so before Zhelan rode back once more. "Sir, around the next turn there are timber supports below the road."

"The kind that can be removed quickly, I would venture."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt gestured. "Horan … this repair is up to you."

After Horan's repairs and reinforcements, and another quint, the upward ride continued.

As much as Quaeryt understood the reasons for the fashion in which the road had been constructed, he was getting more than a bit irritated, since they still had several hundred yards to go before they reached the drawbridge over the gorge that separated the walled hold and the leveled-off peak from the rest of the rocky hill. Still, he decided against pressing too quickly, and he had the imagers firm up anything that looked suspect.

More than a glass and a half after they had started up the winding lane to the hold, Quaeryt and first company rode to a halt just short of the wooden drawbridge across a gorge, close to twenty yards deep. An iron portcullis dropped into the stone slots of the gate towers on the far side, and the ironbound gates swung shut. The bridge retracted

slightly, then dropped, swinging down so that it extended straight down into the gorge below the gate towers, leaving the walled hold isolated.

"Not exactly friendly, is he?" asked Zhelan.

Quaeryt snorted. "I wouldn't be either with a company of armed men at my gates." He walked to the end of the road, standing on the paving stones where the end of the bridge had been, took a deep breath, and then spoke, image-projecting his voice toward the walls of the hold. "High Holder Delauck, Lady Vaelora of Telaryn and Commander Quaeryt are here to pay a friendly visit. We would appreciate your receiving them."

A man appeared at the top of the tower. "High Holder Delauck receives no one he does not know and has not invited."

"He can receive the commander and the lady in friendship and offer his allegiance to Lord Bhayar, or he can suffer the consequences."

"He will receive no one. Do as you please."

Quaeryt concentrated, trying to draw what heat he could from the clouds overhead, and from the trees and growth on the hillsides around the hold. Then, he imaged.

The gate towers vanished, as did the walls extending from them, and a walled stone bridge spanned the gorge. A thin sheen of white ice, unfortunately, also covered the bridge and the flat expanse of stone that remained where the towers and walls had been.

Quaeryt's head throbbed, but only slightly, and he reached down and pulled out his water bottle, then took several swallows of the lager within. Vaelora handed him a biscuit, which he slowly chewed.

"Now, sir?" asked Zhelan.

"We wait." *For the ice to melt and for Delauck to reconsider.*

Shortly, an armsman walked forward through the remnants of what had been a walled formal garden in front of the hold house. He carried a blue-edged white parley flag on a staff.

Quaeryt beckoned for the armsman to cross the stone bridge.

Warily, the man put one foot on the gray stone, then another, then walked swiftly across the span, coming to a halt a yard before Quaeryt and setting the butt of the parley flagpole on the stone approach to the new bridge.

Quaeryt waited.

"High Holder Delauck would like to know your intentions, sir." The armsman's eyes went from Quaeryt to Vaelora, then back to Quaeryt.

"We're here to meet with him and to obtain his allegiance to Lord Bhayar," said Quaeryt.

"And his understanding that Lord Bhayar, while far less petty

than Rex Kharst," added Vaelora, "expects not only allegiance but compliance with the laws he will be setting forth."

The armsman blinked at Vaelora's words.

"You can also convey to your master," said Quaeryt, "that Lady Vaelora is Lord Bhayar's sister, his envoy to Khel, and his personal representative. We expect him to lay down any and all arms and step forward to meet the lady outside the hold house. Any further delays in his hospitality will result in further removals of his hold." Quaeryt smiled.

"Yes, sir." The armsman inclined his head. "I will convey your terms to High Holder Delauck." He turned and strode back across the stone bridge.

"He didn't look happy," observed Zhelan.

"No, but these High Holders need to respect Lord Bhayar, without qualifications and without hesitation," replied Vaelora.

"And since they only respect force applied directly to them and their property, we must show we can apply such force." Quaeryt's voice was dry.

Almost half a quint passed before a group of men walked through the remnants of the walled garden and toward the stone bridge. An angular black-haired figure, wearing black trousers and a crimson shirt, with an open black jacket, was trailed by ten armsmen, their blades unsheathed and held at the ready. The man leading the others stopped at the far side of the bridge. "Since I cannot stop you, I suppose I must invite you in, whoever you are."

Quaeryt sighed. "Zhelan, Voltyr, follow me. If you would remain here, Lady, I would appreciate it. Undercaptain Ghaelyn, when I beckon, if you would have a squad escort Lady Vaelora across to join me."

"Yes, sir."

Vaelora offered a smile, slightly sad and knowing.

Quaeryt rode across the fifteen yards of the span, halting several yards short of the man in black. "Quaeryt Rytersyn, commander in the forces of Lord Bhayar, and protector of Lady Valelora."

"Delauck D'Alte. High Holder of Lauckan." The holder looked squarely at Quaeryt.

"The Lady Vaelora wishes to accept your allegiance to her brother Lord Bhayar of Telaryn."

"For someone who is entreating my allegiance-"

"I don't think you understand, Delauck. She is not entreating. She is allowing you to offer that allegiance. You invite her in and pledge complete allegiance to Lord Bhayar."

Delauck glanced at the stone span and then back to Quaeryt. "Your imager is rather accomplished."

“Imagers. Lord Bhayar has a number of imagers.” Quaeryt smiled. “You will find the road to your hold much improved and strengthened. Call it a token of goodwill.”

“The goodwill of making my hold easier to take.”

“Oh … no. Any who attempt to take your hold will find that they lose everything, beginning with their lives. Excepting Lord Bhayar, of course.”

“Northern Bovaria is a rugged land, Commander.”

“Not nearly so rugged as the lands of Montagne, where Lord Bhayar was raised. You might consider that Rex Kharst sent close to sixty regiments against the forces of Telaryn. Something like fifty-eight perished to the last man. Lord Bhayar lost at most four regiments.”

“You leveled my towers and killed two score or more of my men … and I’m supposed to be grateful and plead allegiance?”

“Yes.” Quaeryt looked beyond Delauck, concentrating as he imaged away ten lifted blades. “Behold your armsmen.”

Delauck turned, then looked back at Quaeryt. He started to speak.

“Say nothing you will regret.” Quaeryt image-projected both authority and sadness with the words.

The holder paled, but only momentarily.

Quaeryt could see the rage held in check, but he raised his hand, and waited as a squad escorted Vaelora forward.

“My lady,” offered Quaeryt, “might I present Delauck D’Alte, High Holder of Lauckan?”

“You might indeed.” Vaelora smiled politely, looking down at the black-haired Delauck. “I look forward to seeing your hold house.”

Delauck hesitated only for an instant. “I am pleased that you would like to see it. If I might show you…”

“A moment,” Quaeryt said. “Major … Undercaptain Voltyr … should any force or unfriendliness be directed at you, begin to remove buildings around the hold until those directing such force desist. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Quaeryt turned to Delauck. “Is that clear to you, Holder Delauck?”

“Yes. I do not have to like it, but I understand.”

Quaeryt shook his head. “You only think you understand, but that will suffice for now. Please show us your hold.”

“You have no fear of entering my domain?” Delauck’s voice held a trace of ironic mocking.

“My only fear, dear holder,” replied Quaeryt, “is that I will be forced to destroy you and bring down the entire hold.”

For an instant Delauck said nothing. “Why don’t you do it and get

it over with?"

"Because the Lady Vaelora would prefer that we do not wreak unnecessary damage on holds, and also because I'd have to seek out another High Holder and do the same with him, and since you're the closest to Laaryn, I'd prefer not to waste time in escorting Lady Vaelora to Khel. But she can tell you about that in due time."

"Of course…" Delauck turned.

Quaeryt, Vaelora, and the escort squad followed the holder and his men over the bare stone that remained where the towers and entry courtyard had been and then along a path through the remaining section of the walled garden. Once they reached the entry to the stone keep, for it was a keep, rather than a hold house, Quaeryt immediately dismounted and offered a hand to Vaelora, making certain that his shields enfolded Vaelora.

Delauck stood on the stone stoop and gestured toward the open ironbound door. "I suppose I must bid you welcome, not that I have much choice."

"We appreciate your welcome," replied Vaelora, her voice containing only grace and not the slightest hint of irony or condescension.

Although he should have followed both Vaelora and Delauck, Quaeryt eased into the narrow entry hall behind Vaelora and before Delauck, in order to make certain she remained shielded. As if she understood, and she doubtless did, reflected Quaeryt, once inside Vaelora stepped to the side to face Delauck, as if waiting for him to conduct her to the parlor or great hall.

"If you would show the way," she said.

"My pleasure," Delauck replied, not quite curtly.

Beyond the narrow entry hall was a larger square hall, and from there Delauck turned to the left, striding down the bare stone corridor to the first archway on the right, where he halted and gestured for them to enter. Quaeryt followed Vaelora into a chamber with a hearth at the far end, but with large windows overlooking another walled garden, one in which there remained some fall flowers. Standing beside the hearth was a gray-haired woman.

"Lady Vaelora, Commander, my mother, Aenitra D'Alte. I trust you will pardon me, but my wife is recovering from a difficult time…"

"I am sorry to hear that." Vaelora's voice was warm, with the slight huskiness that Quaeryt loved to hear.

"She almost died," said Aenitra, easing forward and stopping so as to place a settee between her and Vaelora. "I fear my son did not have a chance to inform me of what you are, Lady."

"She is Lady Vaelora Chayardyr of Telaryn," offered Quaeryt, "sister to Lord Bhayar and his envoy to the High Council of Khel.

While on her way, and stopping at Laaryn, she heard of Lauckan and decided to travel here to receive High Holder Delauck's allegiance to Lord Bhayar. Given the rather treacherous approach to the holding and the unsafe nature of the drawbridge, she ordered that you receive a much safer and more secure way to your holding."

"I am certain it is, from what I have seen of the stone bridge you created," said Delauck, his voice flat, "but it was never intended to be either."

"We know. That would suggest that you were not a favorite of Rex Kharst."

"We've never been fond of any rulers."

"I suggest that you will find Lord Bhayar far more fair in his judgment of High Holders," said Quaeryt. "Some holders, of course, do not appreciate fairness, but they also do not appreciate life."

The gray-haired woman's eyes focused on Quaeryt. "Might I ask you, sir, why you, only of those here, paint your nails?"

"You might. I don't paint them. They are like that."

"Your face is young, but your hair is white. Is all your hair white?"

By way of an answer, Quaeryt eased back his left sleeve.

"What is all that-" began the holder.

"Delauck…" said the older woman, "swear whatever allegiance they require and mean it. If you want your hold and your family to remain."

The holder turned. "You've never presumed…"

"Swear it. You don't want to anger a hand of Erion."

"A hand-"

"Who else brought down your mighty towers and walls and created a bridge across the gorge in instants? Don't be an idiot." She turned back to Quaeryt. "Are you a hand of Erion or the lost one?"

"I have no idea. I've been called both."

"Who are you, truly?" asked Delauck.

"As I said, Quaeryt Rytersyn, commander for Lord Bhayar, and husband of Lady Vaelora."

"Yet she is the envoy?" Delauck's face screwed up in puzzlement.

"She is indeed." To Quaeryt, the scene in the parlor was getting more surreal by the moment.

"If you will pardon me," said Aenitra, "it might be best if I explained to my son." She turned. "Lord Bhayar holds Pharsi blood in his lineage. You can see it in the Lady Vaelora. The commander bears the traits of a lost one of the Pharsi, with the white hair of Erion and the dark eyes. He also limps slightly. The Pharsi High Councils have always been headed by women. Lord Bhayar clearly knows this, and has sent his sister to treat with them. The commander is more than a

commander, and he and his men are here to make a point-that Bhayar will tolerate none of this feuding foolishness that has gone on … and more, I suspect." She turned back to Quaeryt. "Is this not so?"

"You are most perceptive, Lady Aenitra," replied Quaeryt. "Lord Bhayar intends that the laws will apply to all, and to that end, for the time being, a regiment will be stationed in Laaryn."

Delauck frowned slightly. "You did not bring a regiment here."

"No. We judged two companies to be sufficient. Were they not? But Lady Vaelora is being escorted by my command of two regiments and the Southern Army of seven regiments. The one to remain in Laaryn will be Fifth Regiment."

"What do you require of me?"

"Your statement that you will be loyal to Lord Bhayar and that you will not engage in any hostilities against him, his forces, or any other High Holders or groups, such as factors."

"That … I can pledge … and I do so."

Vaelora smiled. "I accept your allegiance on behalf of Lord Bhayar."

"You don't require some oath on paper?" Delauck's voice was almost light.

Quaeryt looked to Vaelora.

She smiled at Delauck. "Only the words written in the heart count. Paper burns in an instant. You agreed to be loyal to Lord Bhayar. So long as you are, he will support you. If you are not, you have seen what can happen."

Aenitra nodded.

"Will you stay for refreshments?" asked Delauck.

"Much as Lady Vaelora would enjoy such," replied Quaeryt, "her time here is limited, and she needs must return to Laaryn to deal with other matters before dark." *Besides which, imaging isn't proof against poison and other less obvious treacheries.*

"We have caused you much concern," added Vaelora, "but I do trust that the unpleasantnesses of the day will be the last, and that at some time, when matters are settled, we will see you in Variana." She smiled warmly.

Behind Delauck, his mother nodded ever so slightly, before saying, "We will see you out and wish you a fruitful journey."

"Thank you," replied Vaelora. "We wish you and your mother well, and your lady a quick return to health."

"I appreciate your thoughts," replied Delauck.

Quaeryt *thought* the High Holder was resigned to the change in his position, but he remained close to Vaelora all the way out of the keep and until they were mounted and across the bridge and on their way down the improved lane.

“You were worried about poisoning and the like, weren’t you?” Vaelora asked as the hold disappeared behind them.

“I don’t think he would have,” replied Quaeryt, “but I couldn’t be certain. That was a risk you didn’t have to take.”

“What about you?”

“I worried more about you.”

“Bhayar said-”

“I know, but…”

“Dearest.”

“Yes, dear one,” Quaeryt said quietly.

Vaelora laughed. After a moment so did Quaeryt-even as he hoped that word of the visit to Lauckan would spread, and that they would only have to make a few more such visits to High Holders in the weeks ahead as they headed downriver from Laaryn. *If there are even any holdings close to the river.*

18

All in all, it wasn't until Meredi morning that Southern Army and Quaeryt's regiments pulled out of Laaryn, heading down the River Laar toward Ephra. While the factors of Laaryn had provided more flatboats, they were only used for supplies, and the troopers were forced to ride-or march, in the case of Skarpa's two regiments of foot-along a very rough road on the east side of the river.

There had been one sad reminder that no matter how hard Quaeryt and Vaelora tried, sometimes there was no remedy for some ills. The small blond girl, about whom Vaelora had worried, had slipped out of the inn on Mardi night and thrown herself in the river. One of the squads riding patrols had seen her running toward the water, but hadn't been able to reach her before the current pulled her into deep water, where she vanished in the darkness. The other girls hadn't heard her leave.

The better side was that Vaelora had found families willing to help the other three, and had persuaded Meinyt to have an officer follow up to make certain they had kept their word. Even thinking about what he had found left Quaeryt discouraged, especially since he doubted that the situation was all that rare in Bovaria, perhaps even in Telaryn.

By Samedi noon, the Telaryn forces had weathered a chilling rainstorm that had halted their progress on Vendrei for several glasses, gusty fall winds, and two broken axles on supply wagons. They had covered close to a hundred milles, passing through hamlet after hamlet. Quaeryt and Vaelora also discovered that Kharst's comparatively narrow and flat-bottomed canal boat rolled considerably even in the gentler waters of the River Laar and that the rudder was too small for quick response. In the end, Quaeryt ordered the canal boat lashed to a flatboat, and he and Vaelora rode with the troopers-although Quaeryt had to admit he did enjoy sleeping comfortably at night.

As they left another riverside village, called Croilles, Quaeryt looked to Vaelora. "Have you noticed that we haven't seen anything even faintly resembling a high holding?"

"You've mentioned that every day, dearest."

"I just wanted to keep reminding you of that."

"You're doing well. Why don't you tell me what that means. You're dying to do so, I think."

"I well might"-Quaeryt grinned sheepishly-"especially since the weather has been nothing to talk about." He ignored the fact that the morning was sunny and pleasant, with just enough breeze to be

cooling without chilling.

"Well … go on."

"Since you insist."

Vaelora rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion.

Quaeryt grinned, then said, "When we traveled up the River Aluse-Southern Army, that is-we didn't find many high holdings there, either, and there were far more ruined holdings than I would have expected, a number of them burned out or abandoned. In fact, I saw more ruined high holdings there than I have in all of Telaryn. When I think back on it, there was something else I didn't see-and that was that people weren't particularly afraid of the High Holders. The majority of the High Holders were afraid or worried about Kharst, and the larger and richer the hold, the more worried they were. Then there was something else"-Quaeryt looked to Vaelora-"something we saw again in Laaryn."

"Powerful factors?"

"*Rich* and powerful factors. Some of the factors' dwellings in Bovaria are the size of hold houses in Telaryn … and all of them are in towns or very close to them … and then there are the roads…"

"You keep saying that Kharst and his forbears didn't build roads, except for the one from Nordeau to Variana."

"Exactly. Almost all the trade and commerce in Bovaria has gone by the rivers, not by roads, and what good roads there are flank the rivers. Kharst's power was limited by those facts. Telaryn is different, and so is Tilbor. Except for the Aluse, we don't have that many long navigable rivers, and the ones we do have are separated by mountains and the like. So rulers built roads. They had to in order to be able to control their people and even the High Holders. Kharst used his assassins to rule the High Holders by fear, and granted the factors more power in order to collect tariffs through them. Bovaria doesn't even have a government in the sense that Telaryn does. I'd assumed that Kharst had some sort of regional governor in Khel, but Bhayar couldn't find any record of that, and all the messages in the Chateau Regis…"

"You destroyed them, didn't you?"

"Those that survived were unreadable," Quaeryt admitted.

"You think that the powerful High Holders in Bovaria were either favorites of the rex and close to rivers, or located in places where the rex would have great trouble attacking or assassinating them?"

"It makes a strange sort of sense." Quaeryt shrugged. "I'm sure there are High Holders that don't fall into that pattern, but too many of those I've encountered or observed do."

"That also explains the Great Canal," Vaelora said. "When Father started tariffing the Bovarian merchants using the River Aluse, that

meant Kharst's father couldn't tariff his merchants as much. He didn't build roads, though. He didn't even think that way. He built a canal from Variana to Laaryn to get goods to and from the port at Ephra."

After a pause, Vaelora asked, "Then why aren't there more high holdings in the hills to the north of Lauckan? Those places would be even harder for any rex to have reached. Or is it because the ground is not only rocky and rugged, but poor?"

"That would be my guess. From the maps, it looks like all the lands north of Laaryn and Tuuryl are rather hilly and inhospitable. And the richer high holdings are those located at the hilly or rocky edges of flatter and more fertile lands-usually away from the rivers."

"That explains Lauckan. It doesn't explain why someone else didn't do what you did, though."

"I think it does."

"It does?" Vaelora's tone conveyed considerable doubt.

"Kharst and his predecessors ruled through the factors and through fear and assassination. He used crossbowmen and armsmen to carry out his wishes. Those are forms of violence against which a ruler can take precautions. We-the other imagers and I-have been effective only because Bhayar has gathered us and because I'm loyal to him. That's because he's a good ruler…"

"Kharst couldn't trust any imager powerful enough to do what you can, could he?"

"I'd be very surprised." Quaeryt sighed. "That's why I have to build the imagers into an institution that has to be loyal to Bhayar and his successors, and one that is strong enough to assure that his successors are good rulers, in a way that will never tempt future imagers into trying to rule."

"That sounds more difficult than unifying Lydar."

"I doubt Lydar will remain unified if we don't succeed." Quaeryt couldn't keep a certain bleakness out of his voice.

"If anyone can, you can…"

"No … it will take you, me … and Bhayar … and all the imagers." *And even that might not be enough.*

19

The following Jeudi evening found Quaeryt, Vaelora, and Skarpa seated in a small private room in the Grande Laar Inn, located in the town of Daaraen, situated on the point of land between the Phraan River and River Laar just before they met-some seventy milles north of the port of Ephra. The Grande Laar Inn was located off the main market square on the west side of the city, not that far from the river piers and warehouses-a number of which Skarpa had commandeered temporarily for Southern Army and Quaeryt's regiments, as well as three other inns and their stables.

In the interests of both security and privacy, the three had decided to have their meal brought to them while they discussed what had occurred during the day, although none of them spoke much until they had largely finished eating.

"Lots of little towns along the river," observed Skarpa, "ever since Croilles, anyway."

"The maps don't show more than hamlets farther from the river," said Vaelora. "Is that because the maps are bad or because no one really knows … or doesn't go there?"

"With roads like they have…?" Quaeryt shook his head. "Most of the crofters don't need good roads, and many of the High Holders don't want them."

"We've only seen a handful of high holdings," mused Vaelora.

"… and we only saw one that was devastated," Quaeryt observed after taking a last bite of a fowl pie that was a touch spicier than he might have liked.

"It had been that way for generations," Vaelora pointed out. "That wasn't Kharst's doing."

"That might have been his grandsire's doing. I don't think the way Bovaria's been ruled has changed much over the years. There certainly wasn't another one near … and we have seen many fine dwellings here in Daaraen, certainly belonging to factors."

"Not a sign of any Bovarian armsmen. Not at all." Skarpa shook his head. "You'd see more in the mountains of Montagne … or in the north of Tilbor. Still say it doesn't make sense."

"It makes sense," said Vaelora firmly. "Fear and treachery…"

Quaeryt nodded. "The Khellan majors all pointed out that Kharst had little success in conquering Khel until he used traders and others to spread the Red Death. In most of the high holdings we visited on the way to Variana, the holders were terrified-gravely concerned, anyway-that they not anger him. And when they could, even the Bovarian commanders used tactics like that."

Skarpa frowned … then slowly nodded. “When you put it that way, they used musketeers from ambush in mass firing and tried to get us fearful and confused … or Antiagon Fire…”

“They weren’t ready for us to attack through those,” Quaeryt pointed out. “They expected to weaken us through fear.”

“They might have, except your imaging turned fear against them,” Skarpa pointed out.

“They didn’t expect that, just the way the factors in Laaryn didn’t expect what you did,” added Vaelora.

For several moments none of them spoke.

“I was thinking we should stay here tomorrow and head out on Samedi,” suggested Skarpa, his words carrying a hint of deference.

“We might even want to stay a day longer if the drizzle turns into a downpour,” replied Quaeryt. “If it’s sunny and clear, then I’d definitely think Samedi.”

Skarpa nodded. “Leave early though. We’ll have to cross the Phraan, and neither bridge looks that sturdy.”

“We need to meet with the local factors in a town, really a small city, this big, but we haven’t heard from them.”

“You will,” prophesied Skarpa. “You will.”

“Even after that … we need to make a statement of some sort.” Quaeryt looked to Skarpa. “A bridge might be just the thing. Call it a gift to Daaraen. It might lead to better roads, and it certainly will leave a lasting reminder.”

“Won’t that tax your imagers?”

“The Phraan’s pretty narrow where the lower bridge is. Threkhyl could handle that himself. I could have Lhandor draw out a plan for one that’s not plain…”

“They don’t need fancy,” Skarpa retorted.

Major Aernyt eased the door open slightly. “There is a Factor Jarell who would like to speak to Lady Vaelora on behalf of the factors’ council of Daaraen.”

“Have him enter in a few moments, after someone clears the platters,” said Quaeryt.

“Yes, sir.”

Two rankers appeared immediately and took the platters, while Quaeryt stood and moved his chair, then motioned for Vaelora and Skarpa to change seats, so that she was seated between them and facing the door.

Several moments later the door opened, and a man in a dark brown jacket and trousers entered, with a white shirt and highly polished boots. Jarell appeared to be only a few years older than Quaeryt, clean-shaven, with straight brown hair slicked back from a high forehead. His smile was winning as he bowed before the table,

his eyes directly upon Vaelora.

"We had heard that there was a grave misunderstanding by the factors' council of Laaryn, Lady Vaelora, and we wished to make certain that no action of ours might be associated with any error on our part…"

"You have not presumed, but you are here to inquire," replied Vaelora. "Unlike the factors of Laaryn, who lied, and then attempted to cover their falsehoods with greater deception. What do you wish to know?"

"What do you expect and require of us?"

"You have paid your tariffs, I trust?" asked Vaelora.

"They were paid, alas, to Rex Kharst, before … the recent … unpleasantness."

"Lord Bhayar may require a token tariff … as a gesture of loyalty."

"We have heard that such was required in Laaryn, but was that not for the failures of the factors in Laaryn?" Jarell's tone was apologetic, as if he were asking for clarification of something he did not understand.

"Much more than that was required of the factors of Laaryn," replied Quaeryt. "Much more. As for tokens of allegiance, Lord Bhayar has already required a token tariff of High Holders. He granted Lady Vaelora the authority to impose such where necessary, while he considers the matter for all factors in Bovaria."

"The tariff system here is most fair … or so many have said."

"It may well be," agreed Quaeryt. "I would suggest, however, that you provide a reasoned argument for the system to him, because those of us from Telaryn are not so familiar with the methods of tariffing used in Bovaria." *That will also explain the system to him, which will be useful, since not much in the way of records survived the ice in Chateau Regis.* "Even so, do you not think some token of allegiance would be merited?"

"We have pledged that allegiance in full and good faith."

Vaelora smiled. "That pledge is most welcome … but as factors you well know that pledges alone do not pay for goods. You do not sell your goods for pledges, and a land cannot be governed on pledges alone. In ruling and in trade, without coin or golds, pledges are empty."

"That is most true, Lady … most true. Yet one would hope not to pay for the same goods twice, nor the same governing."

"That is also true," said Quaeryt, "but there are times when one pays for a good and it is not delivered, and to obtain the good one must pay again. The same is true in ruling. Rex Kharst delivered bad governing, and Lord Bhayar has had to pay twice. He is not settling

the cost upon you, but he may well ask for a token amount against what he has paid. Since the factors of Daaraen have not flouted his authority or lied to his officials, no tariffs are due now. Whether a token tariff for the past year will be required will be Lord Bhayar's decision."

"Thank you for clarifying that." Jarell bowed.

"We will require some additional supplies," noted Skarpa. "We will talk of that later. Where might we find you tomorrow?"

"One of the factors' council members will be at the council chamber on the main market square from eighth glass to fourth glass." Jarell bowed again. "If there is nothing further with which I can assist you…"

"Thank you for your courtesy," replied Vaelora. "You may go."

Once the chamber door closed behind the factor, Quaeryt shook his head.

"It didn't take them long," said Skarpa dryly.

"The factors in Laaryn must have sent a fast boat down the Laar-without stopping," mused Quaeryt. "This is going to create some considerable problems for your brother."

"Factors can be worse than High Holders, it appears," said Skarpa.

"That wasn't what I meant," explained Quaeryt. "The factors of Laaryn immediately sent word to the factors here, and most likely to those all along the river. That suggests that they can and do work together, more so than the High Holders. That also explains why the factors in Laaryn were so surprised. I would suspect that all of the factors' councils, at least along the River Laar, cooperate in managing the flow and pricing of goods."

"They're all in on it, the greedy bastards," murmured Skarpa.

"That's not always bad. It could result in more flour and grain in bad times as well." *Although the price would be higher.* "But it does mean that Bhayar will have to be consistent in his dealings with all factors, and not play off one area or group against another-unless he wants some very dissatisfied factors … and that's not a good idea."

"Inconsistency isn't a good idea in anything," said Vaelora.

"Except occasionally in battle," pointed out Skarpa.

"Your point is taken, Submarshal, and that reminds me." Quaeryt rose from the table. "I need to take care of another matter."

"Where are you going?" asked Vaelora.

"To talk to the imagers, and have Lhandor design a better bridge. It will give him and them more practice for what they'll need to do when they return to Variana."

"Do I want to know what else you have in mind?" asked Skarpa gruffly.

"Probably not." Quaeryt grinned. "But if they build solid bridges across the Aluse and roads in places that need them for trade, that will show that imagers can benefit everyone. That can't hurt." *Assuming we all can survive to return …*

20

By midafternoon on Vendrei the skies over Daaraen had cleared, and on Samedi morning, after checking with Skarpa to determine that Southern Army was indeed riding out, Quaeryt dispatched rankers to inform the factors' council that their presence was expected on the city side of the lower bridge over the Phraan River at eighth glass. Then he summoned the imager undercaptains to meet him in the plaques chamber in the Grande Laar Inn.

While he ate quickly with Vaelora, in their chambers, she looked at him and smiled. "You like doing this, don't you?"

"I'd rather impress Bovarian factors by creating things." *Besides, there's already been enough destruction.* "It's also more impressive, because what you've created remains."

"Dearest, you're an optimist. People fear destruction, not building."

"So … I should just destroy parts of the city?" His tone was ironic.

"No. I'm just telling you what people are like."

"Then it should help if I have the imagers destroy the old bridge first."

"That would be better."

"And I don't want to portray Bhayar like Kharst."

Vaelora shook her head.

"I'd best be going to meet with the undercaptains." Quaeryt swallowed the last of his tea.

"I'll take care of getting all our gear out and ready, dearest."

Quaeryt had his doubts about that, but merely said, "Thank you," and then headed down the stairs to the plaques room. All the imagers were present when he walked into the chamber and closed the door behind himself. With Desyrk and Smaethyl remaining in Laaryn with Meinyt and Fifth Regiment, that left just six imagers.

Not for the first time, Quaeryt wondered if what he planned with the imagers was the best strategy. *Yet … if you keep them all together, then you don't create the impression you need … and Skarpa will need imagers in Ephra.* He offered a smile he wasn't sure he felt, then said, "Good morning. The skies are clear, and we're heading out. As I told you yesterday, we need to provide a certain demonstration for the locals." *And for a few of the regimental commanders … like Kharllon and Meurn.* He looked to Threkhyl. "Threkhyl … you've studied the plan Lhandor gave you thoroughly?"

"Yes, sir. That shouldn't be a problem."

"And you can image the basic structure?"

"Yes, sir. Could do more, sir."

"I'm certain you could, but I don't want any of you unable to image after we leave. With less than eighty milles to Ephra, there's always the possibility of running into something unexpected, especially since there aren't any other Telaryn forces in this part of Bovaria … and there are High Holders reputed to have forces the size of several companies, if not larger."

"You don't think…?" began Horan.

"I'd doubt it, but we've been attacked by smaller forces than those might be, and I'd rather not lose troopers when some effective imaging could prevent it."

Most of the undercaptains nodded.

"There will be one change. I'd thought just to have you replace the old bridge. The Lady Vaelora pointed out a problem with that. Since she has seen the effects of what rulers do for far longer than I have, I do listen to her. Most people tend to forget that the power to create is also the power to destroy, and they fear destruction more than creation. So … Horan, before Threkhyl and the others image the new bridge, I'd like you to destroy the old one."

Horan smiled. "I can do that, sir."

"Good. Otherwise, we'll proceed as planned. Any other questions?" Quaeryt looked across their faces. "Then load out and mount up. I'll see you in the side courtyard shortly."

Once he left the room he hurried back up the stairs to the chamber where he'd left Vaelora, only to find it vacant. He laughed softly and headed back down to the courtyard and the stables beyond, where, indeed, Vaelora was mounted with her single kit behind her saddle, holding the reins to Quaeryt's mare.

Quaeryt just grinned at her and shook his head. "Sometimes…"

"Dearest…"

When Quaeryt saw her expression, and that of Zhelan beyond her, he could only laugh and mount. In less than half a quint, first company was riding away from the inn to meet up with the other two regiments at the northern market square. While there were some people on the streets, most moved away from the riders, although quietly.

Although he had a greater force to gather, Skarpa reached the square within moments of the time that Quaeryt did, more than a quint before eighth glass.

"Would have liked to have moved out earlier," said Skarpa.

"I know, but we need the factors to see this. At seventh glass, many wouldn't have come. The council would, but not some of the others, and the more that are here, the better." Quaeryt glanced to the southeast side of the market square, where more than a score of factors stood, many with frowns and quizzical expressions on their

faces. “I’ll think I’ll ride over there for a moment. If you would position the column, with the imagers in front, the way we planned.”

“I’ll take care of that. Be a pleasure to see their faces.” Skarpa snorted.

“Zhelan! The submarshal will be positioning first company.” As he called out to the major, Quaeryt could see Vaelora beside Zhelan. She gave Quaeryt an amused smile.

“Yes, sir.”

Quaeryt turned the mare and rode across the square to where the factors had gathered. He’d barely reined up when Jarell stepped forward.

“Might I ask, Commander, the point of requiring the factors’ council to be here this morning?” Jarell’s voice was polite, but there was a tension in it. “I doubt that the factors need to see your arrayed forces to understand the power of Lord Bhayar.”

“There is power, and there is power, Factor Jarell. But in answer to your question, we did not request your presence merely to see our troopers depart Daaraen. We had another purpose, which will become clear in a few moments. If you and the others would move a few yards farther north, to where you have an unobstructed view of the bridge, everything will become most clear very shortly.” Quaeryt smiled politely, but he did image-project a sense of reasonable authority. “The matter will not take long, and I appreciate your diplomacy in dealing with a difficult situation.” He had no doubt Jarell had been chosen to treat with them just because the factor was calm and diplomatic, but it didn’t hurt to recognize it.

Quaeryt eased the mare along the edge of the paved portion of the square, then waited for the gaggle of factors to follow, listening as he did.

“… don’t see the reason…”

“… power’s its own reason, Vauxal … its own reason…”

“… be thankful you’re not watching executions…”

“… just glad they’re leaving before they require all the provisions we have…”

Once Telaryn forces were in position, the imagers at the head of a column that stretched for a good half mille, if not farther, back through the streets, Quaeryt guided the mare to a position between the imagers and the factors, then reined up. The undercaptains waited no more than thirty yards from the approach to the old bridge and less than ten from the gathered factors.

“Factors of Daaraen!” Quaeryt projected authority, then waited for the murmurs and conversations to die away before continuing. “We requested your presence here this morning for a specific reason. In coming to Daaraen, we could not help but notice that the bridges

across the Phraan were in less than perfect repair. Therefore, as a gift to Daaraen, and as a reminder of the beneficence and power of Lord Bhayar, we have decided to remove this bridge and replace it with another … one that is … sturdier. Much sturdier."

Quaeryt turned and gestured to Horan. "If you would remove the present bridge."

"Yes, sir." Horan gazed at the narrow timber span, barely wide enough for a single wagon, with narrow railings and planks separated enough that anyone on the bridge who looked down could easily see the gray waters of the river.

A single flash of light flared across the river, and thin sheets of white fog rose from the water, immediately dispersing to reveal … nothing. Where the old timber bridge had stood, supported on two stone pilings, nothing remained, not even the pilings.

Quaeryt said nothing, just waiting, again listening.

"… what happened…"

"… Namer-flamed imagers…"

"… do that?"

Quaeryt again spoke, image-projecting his voice. "Now that the old bridge has been destroyed totally, it is time for a new and stronger bridge to replace it." He gestured to Threkhyl.

Another series of light flashes flickered across the river, followed by a white fog that filled the air above the water, water now covered with a thin layer of ice. The fog immediately began to disperse under the bright morning sun, revealing the solid structure that arched over the river with enough clearance for the largest of river and flatboats-but not enough for tall-masted sailing craft, since Quaeryt doubted that few would attempt sailing up the narrow and shallow Phraan. As Quaeryt had suggested and Lhandor had drafted, the bridge supports were of black granite. The side walls and the pillars at each end were of image-hardened white alabaster. The roadbed was wide enough for two large wagons side by side, with room to spare.

Quaeryt studied the faces of the factors as they beheld the bridge that seemed to rise out of the white fog. Most showed no initial expression, as if they could not quite comprehend what had occurred before their eyes. One-Jarell-frowned, nodded, then turned to the older factor to his left, murmuring something. The thin sheet of black ice on the river, which extended several hundred yards upstream and downstream of the new bridge, began to crack into fragments that shimmered in the sun, and more wisps of fog rose from the ice and the water.

Quaeryt waited, watching to see what ice, if any, remained on the bridge roadway, but the thin rime quickly dispersed, far more swiftly than the ice on the river below. He looked back to face the gathered

factors. “To prove the strength of this bridge, we will leave Daaraen by crossing it on our way to Ephra.” Turning from the factors, Quaeryt eased the mare over to ride beside Vaelora, flanked by Zhelan on the far side.

Then he gestured and ordered, “First company! Forward!”

The roadway’s black stone did not even vibrate as the riders of first company, and then of Eleventh and Nineteenth Regiments, rode across, four abreast, filling the span from end to end.

When they reached the middle of the bridge, Vaelora leaned toward Quaeryt. “Very well done, dearest. They will remember the day.”

“And the power of Lord Bhayar.” He grinned.

21

By ninth glass on Lundi morning, the Telaryn force had passed through a score of hamlets and villages, the last being Ghaern, a largish village where they had spent the night on Solayi. They had reached a point some fifteen milles north of Ephra, and while the troopers watered mounts and took a break, Quaeryt, Vaelora, and Skarpa stood under an oak tree that was shedding leaves with each gust of a damp wind that felt only a trace less than raw.

"So far as I can tell, there's no way to cross the river except by ferry," said Skarpa. "The maps don't show any bridges. None of the locals know of any, and the only ferry is supposed to be at Geusyn. That's maybe five milles north of Ephra." He gestured to the far side of the river. "Over there all I can see is marsh and swamp and trees … and sometimes our supply flatboats."

"We should think about building a bridge somewhere," suggested Quaeryt. "If you need to deal with the Antiagons, you don't want to rely on ferries."

"Needs to be closer to Ephra," said Skarpa. "We'd have to slog through swamp on the west side."

"We'll have to see if there's any place with solid ground on both sides and where the river's not too wide," added Quaeryt. *If there even is such a place.* He was already worrying about saying that he and the imagers could build a bridge to Ephra. *What if the river gets even wider and the ground stays swampy?*

"I'd not want to wager on that," replied Skarpa.

"Nor I, either. It might not be practical, but I can hope." Quaeryt refrained from shaking his head. "Have either Meurn or Kharllon said anything about the bridge Threkhyl imaged?"

"Not a word. Not where I've heard anything."

That wasn't surprising.

In another quint Southern Army was again riding along the rutted road south, with first company in the van, followed by Eleventh Regiment. Skarpa and Quaeryt rode side by side, with Vaelora and Zhelan behind them. Quaeryt couldn't help but glance continually at the river, and at the far side, but the western shore seemed an unchanging welter of low trees, reeds, and high grasses, stretching west as far as he could see. *Does it go on all the way to Ephra?*

After another glass or so, his intermittent study was interrupted by the sound of scouts galloping back toward the vanguard.

"Sirs! Raiders ahead! Attacking a wagon."

"How many?" demanded Skarpa.

"A squad. Couldn't be more than that."

Quaeryt turned in the saddle. “Major … take first company. Lhandor and Threkhyl, you go with them!”

“Yes, sir!”

“First company! Forward!” ordered Zhelan.

Quaeryt forced himself just to watch as first company headed out at a measured pace.

“Very good,” murmured Vaelora as she eased her mount forward until she was riding almost at Quaeryt’s shoulder.

“I agree, Lady,” added Skarpa, with a laugh.

“Thank you both,” replied Quaeryt dryly.

“Can’t say I’m surprised that there are raiders here,” Skarpa finally said, easing his mount almost to the left shoulder of the road to allow Vaelora to ride up between him and Quaeryt. “No large towns, no sign of High Holders.”

“But what are they raiding?” asked Quaeryt. “The most valuable goods are on the river … or in Ephra or Kephria.”

Skarpa frowned. “If they’re raiding, they aren’t doing it for nothing.”

The column continued southward, and a mille later, as the road curved back eastward around a low hill, two scouts rode toward them, reining up and then riding beside Quaeryt along the shoulder on the east side of the road.

“The raiders were gone when first company got there. They attacked a wagon.”

“Who were the riders?” asked Skarpa. “Could you tell?”

“No, sir,” replied the scout. “They wore dark green, all of them, like uniforms.”

“Someone’s private army,” ventured Quaeryt. *But that raises even more questions.*

Ahead, Quaeryt saw a wagon, and first company, formed up on the road to the south of the wagon, with a squad of rankers and Zhelan surrounding the wagon.

The first thing that Quaeryt noticed as they rode closer was the blackened area around the rear of the wagon, as if someone had started a fire that had failed to ignite the broken tailboard. The wagon itself was small, half the size of a dray with large high wheels supporting a body barely three yards long and perhaps half as wide. The wagon bed was a yard deep and a canvas sheet had been tied across barrels and kegs set on their butt ends, but the containers had been smashed open and their contents strewn across the road and the west shoulder.

Quaeryt had no trouble smelling the overpowering odor of what had been in the wagon. “Elveweed,” he said to Vaelora.

“All those barrels?”

"It looks that way."

The single draft horse lay on its side, unmoving in its traces. Seeing the dark stain on the dirt, Quaeryt reined up beside Zhelan and looked closely. One side of its skull was crushed in.

"What sort of weapon…?" He shook his head.

"Something like a morning star," answered Zhelan.

"But … does anyone use those anymore?"

"Someone did here."

"They had to be carrying it on purpose-just for that." Quaeryt couldn't think of any other reason for carrying such a heavy weapon, one unnecessary in warfare when almost no one wore armor any longer. Then he noticed the body of the man in gray, sprawled on the road in front of the dead horse. His skull was also crushed.

A woman knelt by him, her body shaking.

Vaelora dismounted, handing the reins of her mount to one of the scouts, and strode over to the woman. Quaeryt followed, still mounted.

"We weren't doing nothing," sobbed the woman, looking up to Vaelora. "Traes, he was just trying to put food on the table."

"With elveweed?" murmured Quaeryt.

"Why did you need the elveweed to do that?" asked Vaelora.

"Only thing folks'll pay for hereabouts. Traders sneak north from Antiago. Elveweed don't grow there."

Quaeryt frowned. "You couldn't sell it in Ephra?"

"How'd we get there? Can't afford the ferry. 'Sides, factors … holders don't let no one doesn't hold a medallion sell nothing there. Who's got silvers for that?"

"What about selling it yourself farther south?" asked Quaeryt.

"You crazy? Antiagons fry anyone selling elveweed … except some of their own. That's why we sell to their traders."

"Who attacked you?"

"Friggin' holder. Had to be Chaelaet. Dark green." The woman's eyes took in Quaeryt's uniform and then that of Zhelan. "Who are you?"

"Commander Quaeryt of Telaryn. We're headed to Ephra."

The woman turned to Vaelora. "You help me, Lady … please … You are a lady?"

"I am."

"Don't let them…"

"They won't touch you. They're not like the Bovarians or the holders here." Vaelora paused. "They know they'd answer to my brother … and to my husband."

"… husband?"

"The commander is my husband. You can ride with us so long as

you wish."

Interestingly enough, the woman did not ask who Vaelora's brother was.

Or perhaps she thought that Vaelora's husband was also her brother. Quaeryt had heard that such marriages occasionally occurred among the oligarchs in Jariola, but why would a Bovarian woman think that might happen in Lydar … unless she knew so little of geography that all places outside of Bovaria were the same?

By the time the troopers had cleared the road and brought up a spare mule to hitch to the wagon, which was unharmed, Vaelora had calmed down the woman and had her riding beside her while a trooper drove the wagon, along with the supply wagons. Vaelora said little, and whenever Quaeryt glanced in her direction, she shook her head, indicating that the woman was not ready to say more than she had.

Quaeryt motioned to Skarpa, and the two rode farther ahead, putting more distance between their mounts and those of the women.

"Have the scouts found out more about those riders?" asked Quaeryt.

"I was about to ask you."

"Zhelan said they were long gone by the time first company reached the wagon, but the woman said the riders had to belong to a holder named Chaelaet because they wore dark green."

"That's a start. Don't care much for elveweed, but I care even less for holders sending armsmen out to smash heads."

"From what Bhayar intimated, some of the High Holders here may be trading in elveweed themselves. It could be that they don't want anyone else doing it."

"That would make sense." Skarpa snorted.

"That means you're going to have trouble with them as well as with Aliaro."

"And if I come down on the High Holders, they might just decide to make this part of Bovaria part of Antiago, you think?"

"They might threaten that. If they do, you'll have two strong imagers. Don't argue. Just have Threkhyl topple their holds in on them."

"You're sounding like Meinyt again."

"There are times when young commanders can learn from grizzled old subcommanders," retorted Quaeryt. "But then, the more I see of Bovarian High Holders, the less I'm impressed."

"You've never been impressed by most High Holders."

"I'm even less impressed by those here in the south."

"I can't imagine why."

Both men shook their heads as they continued to ride southward.

22

By fourth glass on Lundi evening, Southern Army reached Geusyn, the largest town they'd seen since leaving Daaraen. While there were actually nine inns in the town of various sizes, all with stables, in the end Skarpa, Quaeryt, and the senior officers had to work hard to get all the troopers and mounts in what passed for quarters, with Kharllon gently pressing for his regiment to use the northernmost inn.

Skarpa had arranged for the senior officers to be quartered in the River Inn, and Quaeryt couldn't help but wonder how many inns there might be of that name all across Lydar. The one in which he and Vaelora were staying was an oblong two-story structure, solidly built, clean, and with little else in terms of architecture or design to distinguish itself-except that it had three plaques rooms, suggesting to Quaeryt that more than a few traders engaged in plaques.

While Vaelora dealt with the widowed woman, and tried to help her … and learn what she could, Quaeryt sought out the inn's stablemaster. Ostler, really, he reflected as he sized up Haern, a wiry man a good ten years older than himself.

"What'd you be wanting, sir, besides the grain and fodder for your mounts?"

"Information."

"Don't know as I'd be the best for that."

"I'm sure you would be for what I'd like to know. You've seen people come and go for years here, I'd imagine."

"More 'n ten years, sir."

"Do most traders stay here in Geusyn as long as they can … or do they go to Ephra as soon as possible?"

Haern laughed. "No one'd go to Ephra sooner than they had to … or stay long there, not given a choice. Place is filled with red flies, green skeeters, and flux. A night at an inn not so good as here costs twice as much, and the food's worse. Only reason traders go there is to get their goods on an outbound trader or buy and off-load from a spice ship from the south. Otelyrn and the like, you know. Wouldn't say that there might not also be curamyn and a few other things, either. Course the traders'd go to Kephria if they could, but with the walls and the guns and the imagers…"

"Do the Antiagons fire at everything coming down the river?"

"Aye … well … sometimes, mostly at vessels not showing an Antiagon trade flag … that's why fewer and fewer trade ships call at Ephra, and why most leave on the early morning or early night tides. Been that way ever since Rex Kharst sneaked imagers near the piers at

Kephria and they fired warehouses there. Say that none of the imagers and boats escaped, not that their deaths stopped half the port quarter from burnin'. Could see the flames all the way up here that night…"

"What about the ferries? How do they avoid the Antiagon guns?"

"The current and the tides. They use the current to cross the river heading downstream, then wait for the tide coming up the Gulf so that they can cross the river to the towpath below Geusyn, and mules tow them back up to the piers here."

After another quint's worth of questions, Quaeryt thanked the ostler and headed back into the inn. There, he met with Zhelan, Alazyn, and Khaern. He still waited a quint longer for Skarpa to finish meeting with his senior quartermasters before he could draw the submarshal away and relay what he'd learned so far.

When Quaeryt finished, Skarpa looked at him. "The more I learn about Bovaria, the more I wonder how Kharst governed it at all."

"He didn't. He tariffed it and used the tariffs to build an army to plunder elsewhere and to terrify High Holders into paying the tariffs to support him and the army." Quaeryt knew he was oversimplifying, but he wasn't sure that he was that far off.

"Do we even want to go to Ephra?" asked Skarpa.

"I don't think you should," replied Quaeryt. "You'd just have your army trapped there, and all the real problems you face are on this side of the river. I don't have much of a choice."

"Are your ships there?"

"I don't know. There was no one at the ferry piers when we got here, and no one else seems to know. I can only check tomorrow."

Skarpa nodded. "I've arranged a senior officers' mess-that includes Lady Vaelora-in the large plaques room at sixth glass. We need to go over what you and I and the other commanders have found out, and what everyone thinks."

"We'll be there."

After leaving Skarpa, Quaeryt turned and headed up the narrow stairs, stairs that creaked with every step, to find Vaelora. She unbolted the door when she heard his voice.

He smiled, seeing her in a camisole.

"Dearest … not now. I've been washing up." She stepped aside and rebolted the door behind him.

In order to take his mind off what he'd just seen, he looked around the corner room, large enough for an inn, but without curtains, only inside shutters, and a wide bed that sagged slightly in the middle. "What do you think of the quarters?"

"They're more spacious and less gracious than the canal boat. What are you going to do with it now?"

"Leave it at the piers with the supply flatboats. They're all

guarded. I suppose I should see if it can be towed upriver, although I don't see how, given the lack of towpaths and the state of the roads." He shook his head.

"That's a pity. It's a beautiful boat, and I'd hate to see it rot away."

Quaeryt agreed, but he didn't have a ready solution. "What happened to the woman?" he finally asked as Vaelora walked back to the table that held a washbasin and pitcher. He removed his visor cap and set it on the plain square table at the side of the bed.

"She left. I couldn't persuade her to stay. She said she had an aunt. I doubt she does, but I don't think she trusts anyone, especially troopers and officers from Telaryn, and she would have felt like a captive if I'd insisted."

"We rescued her. You know-she knew-what those troopers-raiders-would have done."

"She did, and she was grateful. She was also afraid our kindness wouldn't last."

"Mine, you mean?"

"Most likely," Vaelora admitted. "I gave her some coppers and silvers. She didn't refuse."

"What's her name?"

"Willina," replied Vaelora. "She's younger than I am."

That surprised Quaeryt, given that Vaelora was not quite twenty-two, and Willina looked ten years older than his wife. *Just how hard has the woman's life been?* Quaeryt was all too afraid he knew. "How long has she been married?"

"I don't think they were married. She lost a child to the flux in Agostas. Her man grew elveweed in the swamps on the other side of the river and rowed it across on dark nights."

Quaeryt almost asked why, before recalling that there were no towns-except Ephra-on the west side of the River Laar anywhere near. "Dangerous business to grow it in the swamps, row across the river, try to avoid the High Holders' patrols, and sell it to Antiagon traders." He nodded as he recalled the wagon-light, high-wheeled, able to cover rough ground, and built more for speed than for capacity-a smuggler's wagon. "Why were they on the road, then?"

"She said something about having to make up time to meet the traders. They'd had to travel around Ghaern because another High Holder had set up road blocks to see if anyone was carrying contraband."

Quaeryt wanted to shake his head. In Laaryn, the factors controlled trade, but near Ephra, it sounded like the High Holders-or some of them-did so. *But Bhayar told that they might be a problem for Skarpa.* "I'm beginning to wonder if Kharst really even governed down

here."

"His wanting to take Ferravyl makes more sense now," offered Vaelora.

"In a way, it does," mused Quaeryt, "but he'd still have had to take the whole river and occupy Solis. That would have cost him dearly, even if Solis is a better port. Here, all he'd have to have done is take Kephria and some territory to the south to get a decent port, not an entire chunk of another land. He already controlled the river-except for this part."

"You don't know how strong the Antiagon defenses are … or how much the local High Holders were paying him in tariffs. You've told me how much in golds elveweed brings. What if all the High Holders along the Lohan Hills, from here to the Sud Swamp, have interests in elveweed … and their own armies?"

"There can't be that many."

"There could be enough."

"It doesn't make sense," Quaeryt asserted. "Kharst raised a huge army against us. Less than ten years ago, he did the same and took over Khel. Surely, he could have lopped off a chunk of Antiago, the part with Kephria in it, and fortified it."

"Kharst didn't have many imagers, and Aliaro does. At least, he's supposed to. The Autarch also has Antiagon Fire. You've told me what damage that could have done if it hadn't have been for you and the imagers. When Kharst attacked Ferravyl, he had no idea that you and the imagers even existed. Have you forgotten that?"

Quaeryt had. He laughed. "I've been thinking about what Kharst and his commanders knew after the war started, not before. I hadn't thought of it that way."

"And if the High Holders here were paying higher tariffs…" added Vaelora.

"And other High Holders and marshals wanted lands in Telaryn…" Quaeryt nodded. "I suppose it makes sense in a strange way."

"Dearest … things are never as direct as one might think."

Quaeryt smiled. Vaelora might not know all he did about life beyond a capital city or a palace, but she'd seen and heard far more than he had about what went on around a ruler. "I forgot to tell you. We're going to eat with Skarpa and the regiment commanders and subcommanders in one of the plaques rooms."

"I thought we might. He hasn't had much of a chance to sit and talk to any of you."

"And you," Quaeryt added.

"If I know you, you've been making inquiries. What did you find out?"

“Nothing that pleases me,” he admitted.

“Why don’t you tell me while you wash up?”

Recognizing the gentle double command, he grinned. “As you wish, my lady.”

“I do, indeed…” She smiled. “Later … dearest.”

He began to explain what he had learned.

Before that long, he finished washing up, and they walked down the creaky narrow stairs to the large plaques room, where Skarpa was waiting outside.

“The others are already inside, even Commander Kharllon.”

“Of course,” replied Quaeryt lightly. *He wouldn’t want to slight Vaelora.*

“If you would lead the way, Quaeryt, and if you would accompany me, Lady?”

Quaeryt understood. He was junior, but Skarpa could afford neither to place himself above Bhayar’s sister, nor himself below her.

All the regimental commanders stood as Quaeryt entered, followed by Skarpa and Vaelora.

The large circular table was set for eleven, with the three vacant places facing the door. Vaelora sat on Skarpa’s left, with Quaeryt on his right. Kharllon was located beside Vaelora, and Paedn beside Quaeryt.

Once everyone was seated, and the two trooper servers had filled all the goblets, Skarpa raised his and offered the toast. “To our safe arrival in Geusyn and to the effective accomplishment of the tasks ahead.”

“To arrival and accomplishment,” replied Quaeryt, leading the response, then taking but the smallest sip of the wine, a pungent red.

Kharllon turned toward Vaelora, asking, “How have you found the journey so far, Lady?”

“Far easier than riding across Telaryn,” replied Vaelora.

Quaeryt refrained from smiling and turned to Paedn, the older subcommander to his right, as the two troopers began to serve, beginning with Vaelora and Skarpa. “What strikes you about southern Bovaria?”

“It’s poor.”

“What else?”

“It shouldn’t be. Good rivers, good land.” The balding subcommander absently brushed back a wispy lock of blond hair, his fingers not quite twiddling with the stem of a goblet still nearly as full as when it had been poured for the first toast.

“Why do you think that is? That it’s so poor?”

“No one cares. Not the High Holders. Not the rex.”

“Things should get better under Bhayar, then.”

"It takes time. People don't change. Their children sometimes do."

While Quaeryt could overhear some of the conversation between Vaelora and Kharllon, who was being politely most solicitous of Lord Bhayar's sister, he quickly gave up trying to make sense of those phrases, since it was a strain to converse with the clearly laconic Paedn.

"What did you think about a holder's men attacking that cart?"

"What cart?"

Quaeryt went on to explain.

Paedn nodded when Quaeryt finished, then said, "Elveweed's more profitable than anything else. The High Holder will only hear your men attacked them. That will make getting allegiance harder."

"We were supposed to let them get away with it?"

Paedn laughed, just a short soft bark. "No. It just works that way."

"It's always that way," interjected Skarpa from Quaeryt's left. "Sometimes, the more you try to help people, the more they blame you."

Paedn nodded.

"The whole matter is disturbing," Skarpa added. "Either the High Holders don't have control of their armsmen, or they don't care about the people around Geusyn. Either way…"

"It's not good," said Paedn.

The fowl casserole provided by the River Inn was adequate and filling. The rest of the dinner conversation was pleasant and polite, and Quaeryt learned little more than he'd already learned from previous meetings of the regimental commanders. He was more than ready to go upstairs with Vaelora when the meal was over, but neither spoke until they were alone in their chamber and he had imaged the lamp on the narrow writing table into light.

"What did Kharllon have to say?" asked Quaeryt.

"He was most charming," replied Vaelora. "He's intelligent and knowledgeable. I did ask him what he thought of Rholan. He said that Rholan was likely a scoundrel who lacked golds and talent with anything other than words. So he turned to selling faith as a way to make his living."

"Did you ask him what he thought of scholars, then?"

"I did." Vaelora grinned. "He said the best were useful, the worst only misguided. I didn't press him on that. I think he actually believes what he said."

"Anything else? Of import?"

"He doesn't much care for Skarpa, but respects his skills. He didn't say it that way. It was more like, 'Lord Bhayar needs the best commanders he can find in times like these.'"

“And the implication is that it’s unfortunate, but necessary.”

“Something like that … all unsaid.”

“Did he mention Deucalon or Myskyl?”

“No. He did say your forces would have had a more difficult time fighting your way up the Aluse if the Bovarians had had better marshals. For that, he was most grateful. He also conceded the same was true of the Bovarian leaders the Northern Army faced as well.”

“An interesting way of putting it,” mused Quaeryt.

“He did mention how strange it was that the Bovarians didn’t use cannon against you until you were close to Variana.”

“It only seems strange. Cannon are heavy. They’re hard to transport, and you’ve seen how bad the Bovarian roads are. Kharst doesn’t have much of a fleet, either, so the Bovarians haven’t that many cannoneers with experience. Kharst was saving those to defend Variana.” Quaeryt yawned.

“You’re tired.”

“Not that tired.”

“You…” Vaelora shook her head.

“A man who has a beautiful and loving wife likes to appreciate her.”

“You’ve made that quite clear … dearest.” But she did smile … warmly.

23

On Mardi morning Quaeryt rode south from Geusyn with Skarpa and the first battalion from Third Regiment. The two imager undercaptains who rode behind them and in front of the first squad of rankers were Voltyr and Threkhyl. Quaeryt had left the others in the town to practice imaging skills, but he wanted the two he planned to leave with Skarpa to see as much of the area as possible before he and the other imager undercaptains departed.

After seeing the dark circles under Vaelora's eyes that morning, he'd also insisted that she remain at the inn and rest. The fact that she hadn't protested showed how tired she was … and that worried Quaeryt. *And you shouldn't have kept her up so late.* He winced at that thought and concentrated on studying the road and the terrain.

The road south from the town hugged the eastern shore of the river, close enough that Quaeryt could see the narrow towpath used to pull the flatboat ferries back to Geusyn. For the first mille or so, he saw no ferries, but several hundred yards later, they did pass a smaller craft drawn up on a mud flat adjoining the towpath. Two men were working on what Quaeryt thought was the tiller post. Neither looked up.

After riding another mille Quaeryt could see gray stone walls ahead, stretching for a good mille from the water's edge to a rocky hill and partway up the hill. Across the river to the west, almost a mille away, there was a raised area, surrounded by reeds and swamp, on which perched an odd assortment of buildings and roofs. Below them was a harbor, but Quaeryt could only see two merchanters, both sloop-rigged, suggesting coastal traders … and no sign of either the *Montagne* or the *Solis.* Just ahead was a set of piers, most likely where ferries unloaded on the return trip from Ephra. A packed clay ramp led from the end of each empty pier up to the road.

"Battalion! Halt!" ordered Skarpa.

Quaeryt could see why. South of where they had halted the road turned into a narrow rutted track that looked not to have been traveled in years, although the lower growth flanking the track showed that at one time the road had been used more.

"Well … what do you think?" asked Skarpa, turning in the saddle toward Quaeryt.

"The walls ahead look to be some ten yards high, if not more, and solid. The Antiagons have fortifications back into the hills as far as I can see."

"None of this makes sense." Skarpa shook his head. "There's never been a border wall you couldn't march far enough to get

around, except on an island. I can't believe that wall extends all the way to the Sud Swamp. That's some five hundred miles."

"The ground isn't that level, and it's heavily wooded, at least near here. Do you want to cut a road more than a mille through it?"

"Isn't that what imagers are for?" Skarpa grinned.

"Of course," replied Quaeryt, "but Bovaria's never had that many imagers."

"Still…" Skarpa gestured to the west. "Ephra's an island of solid land in the middle of a swamp. Why did the Bovarians build Ephra on the west side?"

"Where else could they have built it with access to the ocean that they wouldn't have to worry about Antiago?" asked Quaeryt.

"But they have to get back upstream, some as far north as Laaryn."

"Most of them don't get back that way. They load the goods on ships at Ephra and sell the flatboats for lumber. Then they take the ferry to the east side, where they buy some horses. There are more than a few stables in Geusyn. They ride back north with small high value goods … probably in groups for safety." Quaeryt gestured back upstream. "The piers down there are pretty solid, and the road toward Geusyn has been well traveled."

"Do you really want to image a bridge across the river to Ephra?" asked Skarpa.

"I'm not sure that we could. You'd need a lot of piers, and trying to image them into water would be hard. If the river bottom is all mud, they'd just sink and keep on sinking. Ephra might be on solid ground and so is Kephria, but the channel between is pretty deep, and more than a mille wide. Besides, even if we could image that massive a bridge, we'd have to take Kephria to get that close to Ephra."

"And I take it you don't want to start another war right now."

"I wouldn't want to think about that, not until matters with Khel are settled." *One way or the other.*

"You'd think about it … if it's necessary. So would Bhayar," said Skarpa.

"Any strong ruler considers everything," temporized Quaeryt.

"Don't see any sign of large ships over there, either."

"No. They might be holding offshore, though. I'll have to take a ferry later today and see if they already arrived and moved offshore. If I were captain of the *Montagne,* I wouldn't want to be anchored for long that close to Kephria. Then, they might not have arrived yet."

"I'd wager on that."

"So would I, but I still need to find out." Quaeryt gestured toward the walls ahead of them to the south. "Do you want to ride farther and get a better look at Aliaro's defenses?"

"We might as well, but we need to be careful. I can't believe that they don't have cannon. Catapults with Antiagon Fire, too. No sign of either, though." Skarpa raised his arm, then ordered, "Forward!"

Over the next quint, Quaeryt kept an eye out, looking for gouges in the ground, broken trees or limbs, or other signs of cannon having been fired, but even when Skarpa called a halt, what had been a road had become an overgrown wilderness, and Quaeryt had to strain to see such signs-and they were years old.

"No one's even tried to come through here," snorted Skarpa after they'd reined up a good three hundred yards short of the walls, where the underbrush effectively made the road impassable. "Not in years. Hard to believe."

"Kharst didn't want to deal with the walls. He attacked Aliaro the way the Bovarians prefer. He came down the river, probably in darkness, and used imagers to set fire to the port. That way, all he lost was the force that set the fire." *And got rid of the imagers as well, no doubt.*

"Be a struggle to bring cannon down here, too," said Skarpa.

"If you have to deal with Aliaro, it might just be easier to have Threkhyl punch a big gap in the walls here."

"It might at that. Don't know as it will come to that, though. Those walls would show that Aliaro just wants to be left alone."

"So long as he can control the Gulf and the ports here," replied Quaeryt. "I can see why Kharst wanted Ferravyl, though. And Khel."

"His factors and traders couldn't cart goods from Bovaria across the hills and the western coastal mountains to ship from places like Eshtora and Ouestan."

"He could have cared less about that. He just wanted the tariff golds from the merchants shipping from those ports, and if he gained control of the Aluse all the way to Solis, then that would have made things easier for most of the merchants, traders, and High Holders in Bovaria."

"You know … when you talk like that, I'm glad I'm just a soldier."

"I'm glad you are, too, especially when I think about Deucalon and Myskyl. I hope Myskyl has a long hard winter in the north of Bovaria."

"He'll find a way not to get that far before the snows hit."

"You're probably right about that. Let's hope it's a ways from Variana, though."

Skarpa looked back at the Antiagon walls. "Don't even see anyone up there. There's probably some poor ranker posted there who's filled his britches seeing a battalion down here on the road. First one in years, I'd wager." He shook his head. "Might as well head back."

Quaeryt nodded, even as his eyes scanned the massive walls that

stretched eastward to the rocky hill a good mille away, then turned his mount and accompanied Skarpa as the battalion reversed its order and began the ride back to Geusyn. He kept looking out at the river, and finally caught sight of a ferry angling its way toward Ephra, but that was the only craft he saw.

For a time, neither officer spoke.

"Have to say that, at times, I had my doubts about Chayar and then young Bhayar," mused Skarpa.

Quaeryt didn't mention that he'd had a few as well. "And now?"

"The more I see of other places in Lydar … well, let's just say I'm glad to be serving under him."

Quaeryt understood that, although he'd known it for years. He just hoped the Khellans would … and that he could convince them of that. *If you can ever get there.*

The road back to Geusyn was without riders until they were within a half mille of the dwellings on the south side of the town.

Vaelora was standing on the front porch of the River Inn when Quaeryt returned just after ninth glass. Even before he stepped up onto the porch he could see that the circles under her eyes were not so dark as they had been.

"You're looking better. The rest helped."

"What did you find out?"

"That things are worse than we thought…" He went on to explain, ending by, "That's why I need to take the next ferry to Ephra."

"I'll come with you."

"Ephra isn't a healthy place. Everyone I've talked to says so. It's dirty and filled with sicknesses, and I intend to stay only long enough to find out what I need to know."

"You're going. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you'll be safer here."

"I'll be safe with you."

"I can't protect you from sickness and flux. You know that."

"You're making me sound unreasonable! I'm not. I can ride as well as you can, and there's no reason-"

"Vaelora … did you look in the mirror this morning? You have to be careful for two people, not just yourself … and your brother told me to remind you of that."

Vaelora made a face. "You'd better not say that too often."

"I hope I don't have to. I don't mind saying that I don't want to go, and I don't want to stay any longer than I have to."

"You'd better not."

"I won't." Quaeryt held back a sigh of relief.

24

In the end, when he boarded the ferry at two quints past noon, Quaeryt took just one squad from first company, as well as Khalis and Horan. The ferryman only grunted when Quaeryt paid the copper a head fee, perhaps because Quaeryt's squad comprised the only passengers. The ferry was a modified flatboat, if deeper of draft and roughly seven yards wide and fifteen long, guided by a large sweep rudder. Quaeryt saw two lockers aft of the square prow, long enough to contain either oars or poles, but neither compartment looked to have been opened recently.

Once they were well away from the pier at Geusyn, Quaeryt noted that the ferry immediately headed toward the far shore. When the craft's heading was established he eased over to the man at the tiller. "How many passengers can you take at once?"

"Maybe three score."

"How many ferries are there this size?"

"We run two at a time when we need to. The factor has four."

To transport just first company and one regiment meant eight trips with all four ferries, assuming the factor who owned them could be persuaded to use all-and that could take days.

The tillerman glanced at Quaeryt's gold crescent moon collar insignia. "You a Telaryn marshal or something?"

"Commander."

"You thinking of transporting some of your men to Ephra to board a ship?"

"That's possible. I won't know until I check with the portmaster in Ephra." Quaeryt laughed. "Is there one?"

"Old Haasyn was, last time I heard. Mostly just posts what ships are tied up or moored to the south, out of range of the Antiagon long guns."

"Can they reach the harbor?"

"Not quite. Any ship that gets within a half mille, though, and it's another story."

Quaeryt nodded. "At what glass will you be returning to Geusyn tonight?"

"Around midnight when the tide's flooding. You be heading back then?"

"That's what I plan, but it depends on what I find out in Ephra."

The tillerman nodded. "Like that with a lot of folks."

As the ferry neared the northern end of the harbor, more like a semicircular indentation in the swamp, Quaeryt could see a number of ships farther to the southwest, two of which looked large enough to be

warships, possibly the *Montagne* and the *Solis*.

Even before the ferry reached the mossy timber piers, the mixed odors of dead fish, swamp, greasy burned cooking oil, and others even less definable oozed over him, creating the impression that the ostler's description of Ephra might be generous. *More than generous,* he decided, as a cloud of green mosquitoes appeared from nowhere.

"These piers aren't where the merchanters tied up, are they?" Quaeryt asked the tillerman.

"Nope. Those are on the south side, far as possible from Kephria. Deeper water there, too."

Two men hurried toward the bow, where they pulled long poles from the lockers and used them to guide the ferry toward the nearer pier. The poles told Quaeryt just how shallow the water was. One of the men laid down his pole and leapt across a yard or so of water to the pier, holding a coil of line attached to a cleat on the ferry. Once on the pier, he ran the line around a bollard, then braced his feet, letting the bollard take the weight of the ferry and bring it to a halt, before removing one turn of line from the bollard and slowly bringing the ferry to rest in the slip.

"Here you are, Commander," announced the tillerman.

"Thank you. Which way to the deepwater piers?"

"See the lane one in-not the one by the seawall-but the one by the public house there? Follow that as far as it goes, and you'll end up on the south harbor square."

With all twenty rankers, the squad leader, Quaeryt, and the two undercaptains on the pier, Quaeryt felt as though the timbers moved with every step any of them took, and he was more than happy to set foot on the lane heading south. The weathered public house, with its sagging salt-grayed shutters and crooked windows overlooking the ferry slips and piers, made the meanest taproom in Solis look like a High Holder's salon by comparison.

"This is a port?" murmured Horan from behind Quaeryt.

"What passes for one in old Bovaria," replied Khalis.

"How did they ever…"

Whatever Horan might have said was lost as they walked past a pleasure house with open windows … behind each of which stood a woman barely clad, or wearing a shift of fabric so fine that she might have been wearing nothing at all. Quaeryt smiled wryly. Even had he not met Vaelora, he wouldn't have been tempted. As a young seaman, he'd seen and heard too much.

After Quaeryt walked another block, slightly uphill, the lane flattened out, and several blocks ahead, down beyond the gently sloping lane, he could see grayish water, and a pair of masts above the low roofs of the harbor area. The shops were slightly less weathered

and somewhat less run-down in the blocks closer to the harbor, but the lines of warehouses bordering the harbor made it clear that Ephra was a port of necessity, and little more.

Quaeryt walked up to the timbered building at the shore end of the second pier, a structure no more than four yards on a side, with a single door, open and tied back to the wall, with a frayed rope around a cleat that looked ready to pull out from the graying wood. He stepped inside and saw a burly man sitting on a high-backed stool looking out through an unglassed window at the harbor and the Gulf waters to the south.

The man turned his head, but did not speak.

"I'm looking for Haasyn, the portmaster."

"You've found him." The gray-bearded burly man studied Quaeryt. "You must be the commander the captain of that Telaryn ship's been looking for."

"Most likely. How long has he been here?"

"Three days … maybe four. Sends in a pinnace every afternoon, around third glass. They wait for a glass, maybe two, till the last ferry from Geusyn comes in."

Almost another glass before the captain sends in the pinnace … and that's if he's prompt. "Where do they tie up the pinnace?"

"End of third pier." Haasyn pointed.

"Thank you." Quaeryt stepped out of the building, then looked at the squad. "The *Montagne* is anchored out to the south. They've been sending a pinnace in late afternoon. While we're waiting, we might as well walk around and see what we can see."

Unfortunately, there was little to see, except more of what they had already seen, and Quaeryt and his group ended up well before third glass standing near the end of third pier.

"Never seen so much of nothing," said Horan.

"You haven't seen that many small towns, then," replied Khalis. "This is a small town that's a port."

"It wouldn't even exist except that Kharst didn't want to let his traders pay tariffs to Aliaro or Bhayar," added Quaeryt.

"Why didn't the traders just pay them anyway, sir?" asked Khalis.

"I wondered that myself … until what happened in Laaryn. It's pretty clear that any factor or High Holder who went against the rex just ended up dead. Since he gave them pretty free rein in other matters"-*including various depravities*-"they tended not to go against his will. I'm sure many smuggled things and went around his 'requests,' but since any word of defying him had rather harsh consequences, that kept the defiance down. I'm only guessing at that, but it fits what I've seen."

Quaeryt stopped talking as he saw a pinnace under sail angling

past the southwest breakwater, running largely before the wind. Absently, he wondered if another reason for the afternoon run from the *Montagne* was because the winds tended to be more favorable. “It looks like that might be the pinnace from the *Montagne.*”

Little more than a quint later, the pinnace eased up to the pier, and two Telaryn seamen immediately secured the small craft to the pier, while an ensign who looked to be a few years younger than Quaeryt stepped out.

“Ensign Paolyn, sir. You’re Commander Quaeryt, sir?”

“I am.”

“Captain Nykaal’s been hoping you’d show up before long, sir.”

“We got here as quickly as we could. Most of the forces are still in Geusyn.”

The ensign nodded. “The captain said that was likely.”

Quaeryt looked at the pinnace, some seven yards long, with a single mast, although he also saw three sets of long oars as well. “Can you take the entire squad?”

“Yes, sir. In this weather. If the swells were higher, I’d want two trips, but the water’s calm, and looks to remain that way.”

Quaeryt could see that Horan and several of the rankers were looking dubiously at the small craft.

For all that, in short order, everyone boarded, and Paolyn had the pinnace headed back southward in less than half a quint. The trip out to the *Montagne* took longer, Quaeryt suspected, because Paolyn headed eastward to pick up the river current, and they had to tack back and forth before they neared the warship, one of the bigger vessels Quaeryt had seen, for all his past merchant experience. *Close to sixty yards stem to stern, if a bit less at the keel.*

Paolyn eased the pinnace up to a boarding platform that had been lowered. “If you would, Commander.”

“Thank you.” Quaeryt stepped onto the platform, then asked, “Permission to come aboard?” as he headed up the ladder to the quarterdeck.

“Welcome to the *Montagne,*” said the short officer in the uniform of a ship’s captain, although he also wore the gold crescents, signifying that, technically, they were of equal rank.

“Thank you, Captain. Quaeryt Rytersyn, commander and envoy to Khel.”

“Nykaal Kaalsyn, commanding. I doubted you could be anyone else.”

Quaeryt wondered why, but didn’t ask, and the two waited as the other two undercaptains came aboard, followed by the rankers. Two of the rankers looked slightly green, and Quaeryt wondered how they might do on the much longer and likely much rougher voyage to

Kherseilles.

"Ensign Paolyn will see to your officers and men, Commander. If you would join me in my stateroom?"

"I'd be pleased to."

Quaeryt followed the captain aft across the main deck and up the ladder to the top deck of the sterncastle. The quarters comprised a cabin roughly four yards by three with a wide bunk against the aft bulkhead and a circular table, firmly affixed to the deck, farther forward.

A steward stood waiting.

"Lager or wine, Commander," asked Nykaal.

"Lager, please."

"Make that two, Vessyn."

The steward nodded and moved to a built-in cabinet.

Nykaal gestured to the table.

They both seated themselves, and the steward set a crystal beaker holding an amber lager in front of each of them and then left the stateroom.

"I understand that we'll also be carrying Lady Vaelora, and that she's accorded the status of an envoy as well."

That bastard Bhayar! He decided that even before you recovered and never said a word. "Not quite. She is an envoy in duties and capabilities. Bhayar decided that was necessary because of the composition of the new High Council of Khel."

Nykaal frowned.

"They're all Pharsi. Pharsi women often govern, and since they lost so many men, the Council is likely predominantly women."

"Oh! And with Lord Bhayar's ancestry, the selection of the two of you … I see."

Quaeryt wasn't certain Nykaal saw completely, but he wasn't about to alienate the captain by explaining because that would likely be taken as condescending. "Lord Bhayar would prefer to obtain agreement without fighting another war."

"I can understand that." Nykaal smiled. "Since you are both envoys and married, you will have my quarters for the voyage. No … don't protest. I still have my sea cabin near the helm and for a week or so, that's more than adequate. Besides, I'd certainly not be the captain who did not give up his quarters to the sister of Lord Bhayar and to the commander who destroyed the Bovarian armies twice."

Does everyone know that? More than likely, Quaeryt reflected, if Nykaal had learned that in port in Solis. "I can't say that my wife won't appreciate that."

"There is one difficulty. Lord Bhayar … ah … his dispatch mentioned two regiments."

"That might be a problem, I take it?"

"If you were thinking of transporting them all at once. The *Montagne* and the *Solis* can each carry about four hundred of your troopers for the week or so it will take to reach Kherseilles. The merchanters … there are only four of them, and, well, they'll average two hundred, maybe a bit more."

"So I can take one regiment and my command company in one voyage and then wait three weeks and perhaps longer, given that it's almost winter, if I want the second regiment?"

"That's about it," agreed Nykaal. "Lord Bhayar requested ten merchanters if possible, and a minimum of four. We were lucky to impress four, and none of them are happy about it, even for the golds Lord Bhayar promised."

"With winter coming on, we'll have to chance it with one regiment and the command company. It's going to take several days just to get the men to Ephra, I fear, even one regiment."

Nykaal nodded. "We can't help much there, but we've got two pinnaces, and we can get them from the south pier to the ship fairly quickly."

"Did the dispatch you received say anything about arrangements for mounts in Kherseilles?" Quaeryt asked.

"No. It just said that those arrangements would be taken care of by others."

Which others? Quaeryt didn't ask, since it was clear Nykaal didn't know.

In less than a quint, Quaeryt and the captain had worked out a tentative schedule for boarding and for the voyage to Kherseilles.

At that moment, Nykaal cleared his throat. "If I might ask … how do you plan to return to Geusyn?"

"I'd thought to take the ferry…"

"Nonsense. We've got a good south wind, and Paolyn can take the pinnace on the tide just before it turns, and then come back. Be a good exercise for him as well."

"If you're certain…"

"No one should have to spend any more time in Ephra than absolutely necessary."

"You've seen it?"

"I landed when we got here on Vendrei. Once was enough. That was true for the crew as well." Nykaal laughed. "You can eat with me, and your officers with the mess, your rankers with the crew, and then we'll send you off."

"I appreciate that." Quaeryt truly did. *The less time we spend in Ephra, the better.* Nykaal seemed a good sort, and the ship's fare was bound to be better than anything in Ephra.

Quaeryt took another swallow of the lager.

25

Quaeryt returned to Geusyn so late on Mardi evening that he had to rise early on Meredi morning to meet with Skarpa. Even so, Skarpa was waiting when Quaeryt joined him in the inn's public room.

"You must have come in late last night," observed the submarshal as Quaeryt slid into the chair across from him.

"More like early this morning." Quaeryt gestured to the server. "Tea, please."

"What did you find out?"

"The ships are here. They're anchored southwest of Ephra. Captain Nykaal has four merchanters in addition to the *Montagne* and *Solis*. That means they can only transport first company and one regiment-unless they make two trips, and that will take another month…" Quaeryt went on to explain.

When he had finished, Skarpa fingered his chin. "You wouldn't have to take the ships at all. You could ride along the coast to Kherseilles."

"At this time of year?" Quaeryt shook his head. "In good weather that would take three weeks, if not longer. Now … who knows?" He paused to take a swallow of the mug of tea the server had set on the small square table. "Besides, if the Khellans aren't in a fighting mood, I won't need a second regiment. If they are, I can't conquer the entire land with two. Besides, I'll be fortunate if Bhayar's 'arrangements' result in enough mounts for one regiment, let alone two."

"You'll take Khaern and Eleventh Regiment, then?"

"Unless you have an objection. I also thought I'd leave Voltyr and Threkhyl with you. They might prove helpful."

"They might indeed." Skarpa paused. "You know that nothing at all might happen here?"

"Aliaro may do nothing, but if he does, you'll need imagers. I also have the feeling you may need to act against some of the local High Holders. Imagers can prove useful in making a point without losing troopers."

"Do you think they'll try anything with this many troopers here? I have my doubts."

"I'd suggest you visit each of them and see what you think."

"You do that better than I do."

"I won't be here … and what do your orders say?"

Skarpa snorted. "You know as well as I do. Don't remind me. Doesn't mean I have to like being polite while leaning on those condescending snots."

"Don't worry about leaning hard. They won't think you mean it

unless you do, not after dealing with Kharst."

"What a frigged-up land." Skarpa shook his head.

Quaeryt wasn't about to disagree. "We'll just have to set it right." *If we can.*

"What are your plans?" asked Skarpa.

"We'll start transferring troopers to Ephra as soon as we can today. It's likely to take several days, if not longer, even using the pinnaces from both the *Montagne* and the *Solis*."

"You honestly think you can get mounts in Kherseilles?"

"One way or another. I just hope it's not the hard way."

"Good fortune on that."

When he and Skarpa had finished, Quaeryt arranged for some breakfast to be sent up to Vaelora, gulped down some egg toast and ham rashers, then waited for Alazyn and Khaern to join him in the smallest of the plaques rooms.

Both entered together, and Quaeryt gestured to the chairs on the other side of the circular table. Once they were seated, he began. "Subcommanders … you may have heard that the *Montagne* and the *Solis* are anchored south of Ephra. I met with the lead captain yesterday."

The red-haired Khaern nodded.

"Yes, sir," replied Alazyn.

"We've run into some difficulties. There are only six ships, rather than the twelve that we had planned for…" Quaeryt quickly explained, then went on. "That means I can only take one regiment in addition to first company. The other regiment will remain with Southern Army."

"You're leaving Nineteenth Regiment with Commander Skarpa, sir?" asked Alazyn.

"I'd thought so. Unless either of you has a reason why it would be better otherwise?"

"No, sir," replied the stocky Alazyn. "That makes more sense. You've worked more with Eleventh Regiment. But this will only be for as long as you're in Khel?"

"That's my intent. Lord Bhayar can always change assignments, but I doubt that he'd see any reason for that."

"When will we be embarking?" asked Khaern.

"As soon as we can … after I talk with the imager undercaptains."

Once Quaeryt had dismissed the subcommanders, he then sent for Voltyr and the imager undercaptains, but met with Voltyr first.

Quaeryt gestured for the undercaptain to take a seat across the circular table. "You know why I requested that we meet, don't you?"

"I suspect so, sir. You intend to detach me to serve with the submarshal, do you not?"

"You and Undercaptain Threkhyl. The submarshal may need two strong imagers, and you're the only one able to keep Threkhyl in line."

"You think so, sir?"

"Your shields are stronger than his, and he knows that."

"He also knows you'd destroy him if he misbehaves." Voltyr's voice was dry.

"I'll talk to him next, and then everyone together." Quaeryt paused. "There is one other thing, and it's what I told Desyrk. If you happen to run across any young imagers, make them apprentices or trainees, and make sure they're paid. Before everything is all over, not that it's ever all over, we'll need as many imagers as we can gather."

"Yes, sir." After a moment Voltyr asked, "How long do you think you'll be in Khel?"

"I'd like to say a few weeks, but it could be all winter, the way things are going."

"Is there anything I need to look out for?"

"Nothing that we haven't talked over already. I would like to emphasize that you're to be very polite to any High Holder, and you're not to trust any of them."

"You don't think much of them, do you, sir?"

"Any of them who survived need to be watched closely. I've gotten the feeling that the most trustworthy ones seldom survived Rex Kharst."

They talked for another quint before Voltyr left.

The plaques-room door had barely closed before it opened once more and Threkhyl stepped inside.

"Take a seat, Undercaptain."

"Yes, sir." Threkhyl nodded and seated himself.

"I'm certain you know what I'm about to say. You and Undercaptain Voltyr are being assigned to the submarshal while Eleventh Regiment and first company are dealing with the Khellan High Council. The reason why I chose you and Voltyr is because you two are the best imagers, and the submarshal will need both your skills. Voltyr is in charge, because he knows how to deal with the submarshal and others."

Surprisingly, to Quaeryt, Threkhyl only said, "Makes sense, sir."

"I'd also like to remind you that you are valuable to me, and to the submarshal. For that reason, when you are called to image something, please think how you can get the greatest effect with the least strain. This will be important because you and Voltyr will only have each other."

"Yes, sir."

Once Quaeryt had finished with Threkhyl, he summoned the other five undercaptains into the plaques room. This time he stood

and left them standing as he surveyed them.

After several moments of silence, he said, “Some of you know what I’m about to say, but not all of you, and there are matters that will affect you all that we need to go over. First is the matter of who is going to Khel … and why. Because Lord Bhayar could not obtain enough ships, only a single regiment will be accompanying us…” He went on to explain his decision and the arrangements he had made. “Do any of you have questions?”

“How far will we have to travel once we reach Kherseilles, sir?”

“We may have to travel all the way to Khelgror, where their High Council meets.”

“Have you had any word from Subcommander Calkoran?”

“Not since we left Variana…”

“What about mounts, sir?”

After almost a quint, Quaeryt dismissed the undercaptains. Then he made his way to the stairs. He needed to see how Vaelora was coming along, as well as to pack his own gear.

26

All in all, the transfer of the troopers and their equipment, including riding gear, took more than three days. Quaeryt had arranged for first company to begin the transfer, sending Vaelora with the second set of ferry trips so that there would be troopers already waiting for her, while he moved back and forth, along with Zhelan, to try to keep the transportation moving smoothly. While the factor owning the ferries hadn't been especially enthusiastic about using all four at once, Quaeryt managed to persuade him, if with a touch of authoritative image-projection.

The breeze off the shore was light as the *Montagne* weighed anchor and spread sail at eighth glass on Samedi night, just two glasses before the first day of winter. Quaeryt and Vaelora wore their riding jackets and stood on the upper deck of the sterncastle of the *Montagne,* looking northward at Ephra, and then to the northeast at the somewhat brighter lights of Kephria.

"It's getting chill," she said.

"We've been fortunate with the weather so far, only a few rainstorms and a touch of snow flurries in the north."

"That likely won't last."

"I'd be surprised if it did. With the clear skies ahead to the southwest, we'll likely have at least a day without storms on the voyage. After that, who knows? How are you feeling?"

"Like all my clothes are shrinking."

"They're not."

"I know that, but it's the way I feel. Pretty soon, I'll have to start wearing the other garments, and I'll look like I'm wearing a canvas sail."

"You'll never look like that."

"I feel that way."

Because Quaeryt had no answer for that, he did not respond immediately.

Vaelora grasped Quaeryt's arm as the *Montagne* pitched forward slightly. "It will get rougher than this, won't it?"

"More than likely, dear."

"I hope I don't get sick from it. I was sick enough for the first two months."

Quaeryt turned as he heard steps on the deck, watching as Nykaal joined them.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" asked the captain.

"It is," replied Quaeryt. "Your men got everything stowed quickly."

"That had something to do with the way the gear was organized. You know something of ships, don't you, Commander?"

"A bit. I was a seaman and then quartermaster apprentice on a merchanter for several years before I became a scholar."

"And yet you're a commander now, not to mention an imager."

Quaeryt wondered how Nykaal had learned that. *Possibly from Bhayar's dispatch … or from his officers or crew listening and asking company officers or men.* It really wasn't a secret, although that was something Quaeryt still wasn't totally used to, not yet. "I was pushed into leading troops in the Tilboran uprising, under Submarshal Skarpa. One thing led to another."

"How did you become captain of the *Montagne*?" Vaelora looked to the ship's captain.

Nykaal laughed, quietly. "You're most protective, Lady."

"Only because my husband has been most protective of me and of my brother and his interests."

"I would doubt that is solely the reason for your protectiveness, but I admire and commend you for it."

"It's far from simple, Captain," said Quaeryt. "After we ended the uprising, I was acting princeps of Tilbor before Bhayar confirmed me in the post. I was ordered to become temporary governor of Montagne after the eruption there, and was then ordered to form imagers into a fighting force against the Bovarians. I was successful-"

"Exceedingly successful, according to Lord Bhayar. But no one ever suspected … your talents?"

"Lord Bhayar and I have known each other since we were students of the same tutor. He suspected I was more than a scholar, but Lady Vaelora was the one who discovered the usefulness of my abilities. Lord Bhayar punished us both for that by insisting that we wed."

"Such punishment!" Nykaal laughed, but the laugh faded. "How effective are your imaging abilities at sea?"

"I have no idea. Why do you ask?"

"I hope they will not be necessary, but the Antiagons do have fast vessels with their Fire, and a good captain always seeks all possible defenses."

"It's likely we can mitigate such an attack. If you need imaging, let me know, and we will see what we can do."

"I do appreciate that, Commander, Lady, and I will bid you good evening." Nykaal inclined his head, then turned and walked back toward the wheel and the steersman.

"He's worried," said Vaelora.

"Wouldn't you be? He's carrying Bhayar's sister, and he has two warships, the only ones your brother possesses, and four merchanters,

and Aliaro has a fleet of warships. In his boots, I'd be worried, too."

Vaelora shivered, possibly not from the cold.

"Are you ready for bed?"

"I am. I get tired more easily."

"I haven't noticed that."

"You have. You were insisting I needed more rest just days ago."

"I haven't noticed that in the past few days."

She smiled. "You haven't been here much … and I did get some rest. The bed in the stateroom is more comfortable than those in the inns."

"It should be." Quaeryt took her arm.

As they headed for the ladder leading down to the hatch that afforded access to the captain's stateroom, Quaeryt gazed briefly off to the starboard, and the dark line of the shore that marked the southern edge of the Gulf of Khellor.

Can you fit everything together? So that it will last?

Vaelora squeezed his hand before she released it to start down the ladder.

27

On Solayi morning Captain Nykaal had insisted on having Quaeryt and Vaelora served breakfast in his stateroom, and Vaelora had insisted that Nykaal join them. In turn, Quaeryt had added his invitation, not only out of courtesy and thankfulness, but also because he sensed a certain tenseness about the compact captain. The steward served tea to everyone, and set platters with egg toast, biscuits, and ham slices before the three, then slipped out of the stateroom.

Quaeryt sipped the tea, then said, "The weather's holding so far."

"The test of that will be when we round Cape Morain and set a northwest course." Nykaal took another swallow of tea from his porcelain mug before continuing. "We may have another more pressing problem."

"Antiagon warships?" asked Quaeryt.

"There are sails to the southeast, and they're closing. Five vessels. The *Montagne* and the *Solis* could put on more sail and likely outrun them, but the merchanters can't…"

Quaeryt nodded politely, but privately doubted that the two warships could outrun Antiagon warships designed for speed.

"If they're Antiagon, and with five ships they're not likely to be anything else, they'll insist that the merchanters pay passage tariffs. That's just an excuse to board and pillage."

"Aliaro's still insisting that the Gulf waters belong to Antiago?" asked Quaeryt.

"When it suits his purpose," replied Nykaal dryly. "Or that of his captains. They're more like pirates at times."

"How long before we're in range of their cannon?"

Nykaal shrugged. "If the winds hold, midafternoon. They must have set sail within a glass of when we lifted anchor. The tides would have been against them for the first few glasses." He took another swallow of tea. "Can you and your imagers do something about them?"

"How close can you get without endangering the ship?"

"There's always danger, but their cannon are limited to about six hundred yards, and they're not very accurate above four hundred."

"I heard that some of the cannon from Kephria could almost reach ships anchored at Ephra."

"They've got one or two huge long-barreled things at Kephria that might reach half a mille on a good day with the wind behind them. They've occasionally hit or come close to careless captains. But on board a ship…" Nykaal smiled ironically. "Anything with that range would be too heavy or too small to fire a ball heavy enough to break a

ship's timbers."

"They don't have Antiagon Fire shells?"

"They say some of their ships do. There's a merchant fleet out of Estisle or Nacliano that has cannon like that. Wouldn't carry those for the world. Too easy to set the entire ship ablaze."

Quaeryt nodded once again. He saw no sense in mentioning what the Diamond ships could do, especially after seeing how careful the captains had to be.

After Nykaal had finished breakfast and excused himself, Vaelora looked to Quaeryt. "You didn't agree with some of what he said, did you?"

"I don't think a vessel this big with this broad a beam could outrun an Antiagon warship. They're designed almost as pirates and raiders."

"So Nykaal either doesn't know or is misrepresenting what his ship can do?"

"One or the other."

"Then we must be even more careful." She paused before going on. "Dearest … whatever you do … do what is necessary with the smallest effort possible on your part. Use the other imagers as much as you can."

"Yes, dear."

"Quaeryt Rytersyn, husband dearest … do not condescend to me, and do not patronize me!" Vaelora's eyes flashed.

Quaeryt winced. "I'm sorry."

"You should be. I rode across most of Lydar for you."

"I am truly sorry," he replied. "I was thinking about how it never ends."

"Dearest…"

He laughed ruefully. "You're right. I was condescending, and I shouldn't have been."

"No … you shouldn't." She smiled. "But since you admit it, I'll forgive you. This time."

Quaeryt managed not to wince again.

Somewhat later, he met with Zhelan and then went through the troopers' quarters, undertaking an informal inspection.

When he returned to the upper deck of the sterncastle, he could see that the sky remained clear, especially to the northwest, and that the wind had shifted slightly, coming from more to the south. The Antiagon ships were closer, but still several milles astern.

Nykaal crossed the deck. "The wind shift will favor them a bit more than the merchanters. We'll need to drop back slightly before long. What they'll do is send two or three of their ships to engage us and the *Solis,* while the other ships pick off the merchanters."

“So we need to stop the ones readying to attack the *Montagne* as quickly as possible?”

“Anything you can do would be most useful,” said Nykaal dryly.

“If you can get us as close as possible, but just out of cannon range, we may be able to take care of several of them. We’ll have to see, but I have several things in mind.”

Over the next several glasses, as the *Montagne* reefed sail enough to slowly drop to the rear of the Telaryn formation, Quaeryt kept track of their pursuers. In between that, he checked with Vaelora, who alternated resting and reading *Rholan and the Nameless*. He refrained from asking her what she thought, fearing such a question might be thought patronizing.

Before he knew it, or so it seemed, the ship’s bells were striking third glass, and Quaeryt and the four imager undercaptains stood on the port side of the upper deck of the sterncastle. He could hear the commands and the movement of sailors and gunners on the lower decks, as well as see the men stationed by the lighter guns on the main deck.

The lead Antiagon vessel was perhaps eight hundred yards away, two hundred south and six hundred off the port quarter of the *Montagne.* The ensign flying from a jackstaff was large and clear-a jagged lightning bolt of green and yellow crossed with a stylized halberd, all against a bright maroon background.

The second Antiagon ship was less than a hundred yards astern of the first, with a third behind, and two others moving northward, as if trying to close on the *Solis* and the four merchanters ahead of and to the north of the *Montagne.*

Nykaal crossed the deck to Quaeryt. “They’re getting close enough to range us with their bow gun.”

“We’ll see what we can do.” Recalling Vaelora’s advice, Quaeryt again studied the Antiagon ship, clearly narrower in the beam than the *Montagne,* with a lower fo’c’sle and gun ports not that much above the waterline. He thought about imaging out a chunk of the lead vessel’s keel, then recalled Vaelora’s advice.

“Imagers! Stand by.”

Quaeryt concentrated on removing a section of the hull perhaps a yard square, just below the waterline immediately aft of the stem, then followed up by imaging out a chunk of the mainmast. A flash of light and pain seared across his eyes, then vanished. He watched as the mast swayed, then slowly toppled back, smashing through the sails and the yards of the mizzenmast. As it did, the upper section of the mizzenmast snapped as well.

The second Antiagon vessel turned in toward the *Montagne,* just enough to clear the faltering first vessel.

After another quint, the second ship was close to cannon range. Quaeryt turned. “Horan … image out a chunk of the mainmast on the nearest vessel. That’s the second mast,” he explained.

“Lhandor … can you put a large hole in the hull below the waterline just aft of the bow?”

“Yes, sir.”

The young undercaptain swayed, then grabbed the railing, but straightened. “I think I did it, sir.”

“Good.”

Quaeryt looked to Khalis. “We’ll wait a moment or so.” His eyes went back to the first Antiagon ship, whose crew was trying to cut away the tangled mass sails and rigging, as well as the shattered and fallen masts. The bow was definitely lower in the water, and dropping, if not as much as Quaeryt would have liked.

After a moment, he imaged again, this time concentrating on creating a smaller hole, perhaps a half yard across, midships and below the waterline. He scarcely felt the effort. *Smaller holes are better.* Then he shifted his attention to the second ship, smiling when he saw similar damage there, as the second ship seemed almost to stop dead in the water.

Even so, the third ship began to close on the *Montagne,* continuing past the first two stricken vessels under full sail. Quaeryt considered the distance, almost a half mille, then concentrated, wincing, and watching as another mainmast toppled backward, snaring the mizzenmast. He didn’t want to try holing the third ship at that distance. Still …

“Khalis … a hole in the third vessel there, below the waterline and as large as you can make without overstraining yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

Quaeryt turned his attention to the two vessels that had been angling northward toward the *Solis,* but as he did, Nykaal issued an order to the steersman, and the *Montagne* eased onto a more starboard heading, as if to close the range to the two remaining Antiagon vessels. He wondered if the two remaining Antiagon ships would continue to pursue or whether they would break off the engagement and see to the three sinking ships.

After perhaps half a quint, both remaining pursuers reefed sails and turned, heading back toward the stricken vessels. Quaeryt watched for a time, but it was clear the two surviving ships were trying to aid the others.

“Imagers, take a break. Get some lager or ale and biscuits, but stand by … just in case.”

As the *Montagne* swung back to the northwest to move up on the slower merchanters, Quaeryt crossed the deck to where Nykaal stood

to the side of the steersman. “I think we’ve removed that threat … for now, anyway.”

“How did you break their masts?”

Quaeryt smiled. “We just imaged out sections of the mast. We also put some holes in their hulls. I don’t think the first ship will make it back to port. I don’t know about the others.”

“How big a hole?”

“One a yard square in the lead vessel, and a second one midships half that size.”

“You can image away things?”

“Sometimes.”

Nykaal shook his head. “With two masts gone … and that kind of holing … they won’t be going anywhere.”

Except to the bottom of the Gulf.

“They might try a night run, though.”

“Not tonight,” said Quaeryt. “They’re not that much faster than the merchanters, and by the time they deal with the damaged ships…”

“They might be waiting for us to return.”

“What are your orders?”

“We’re to see what the situation is in Kherseilles. I’m to consult with you, then decide.”

“That makes sense.”

Vaelora appeared, holding his water bottle. “You need this.”

“You shouldn’t…” He decided against saying more.

“I didn’t come up here until the steward told me the Antiagons had turned away.”

“You told him that would happen, didn’t you? And that he should tell you when it did?”

“Of course … dearest.”

Quaeryt didn’t know whether to laugh, groan, or shake his head.

Instead, he took a long swallow of lager from the water bottle.

28

By the fifth glass of Solayi afternoon, the sails of the Antiagon ships had vanished below the horizon to the southeast. From what Quaeryt had seen, two of the three ships that the imagers had attacked had sunk, but it appeared as though the Antiagons had managed to save the third. While he was relieved that the imaging had not resulted in many, if any deaths, he also worried that by not having destroyed all five vessels, the *Montagne* and *Solis* might face greater problems from the Antiagon fleet in the future. *No one talks about the price of mercy in warfare.* But then, technically, Bhayar and Aliaro weren't at war, at least not so far as Quaeryt knew, even if Antiagon troops had fought against Southern Army in Bovaria.

At sixth glass the steward appeared with dinner, and with Captain Nykaal.

Once dinner had been presented-mutton cutlets with a brown sauce, fried potato slices, and pickled cabbage, along with freshly baked bread-the steward departed.

Nykaal flourished a bottle of red wine. "From my private stock, with thanks for your success in dealing with the Antiagons." He filled each of the goblets halfway, then seated himself, then raised his goblet. "My thanks and appreciation, Commander."

"That wouldn't have been possible without your ship handling," demurred Quaeryt, lifting his goblet in return.

Vaelora nodded as she raised her goblet, although Quaeryt knew her nod likely meant that she appreciated the captain's skill because it had resulted in less strain on the imagers, on Quaeryt in particular.

"This is excellent wine," said Quaeryt after taking his first swallow. "Where did you come by it?"

"My cousin has a vineyard in the hills north of Cheva, and he occasionally gifts me with bottles … now and again."

"It's very good," added Vaelora.

"From you, Lady, that is high praise."

"Indeed it is," said Quaeryt. "She has excellent taste."

"The wine is doubtless better than the fare, but the cooks are decent and sometimes better than that."

After several bites, Quaeryt had to agree with Nykaal's assessment. *Decent and filling, but not much better.*

"I must admit that I don't fully understand why Lord Bhayar would … allow…" Nykaal did not finish his words.

"Why he would risk so many imagers in one command when there are so few of them?" suggested Quaeryt.

"Or why he would hazard his sister in marriage to an imager?"

added Vaelora softly. “Or dispatch her as an envoy to a land that might become an enemy?”

“You must admit that those are questions many would ask.” Nykaal sipped from the crystal brandy snifter engraved with the letter “M.”

Quaeryt finished a mouthful of potatoes, then laughed softly. “No. They’re questions many might wish to ask, but few would dare.”

“I would judge that you have thought through such questions,” said the captain blandly.

“More than a few times.” Quaeryt glanced to Vaelora, who gave the barest of nods.

Nykaal smiled. “I think you have provided one answer already.”

“That is possible,” replied Quaeryt. “I will offer another. While imagers can have a great impact on a battle, Bhayar observed years ago that no imager, no matter how talented, who was sent out into combat without other imagers for support survived for any length of time.” *Since no one ever sent more than one, none ever survived.* “He also observed that no single imager who has been involved in the daily affairs in the court of a ruler has managed to long survive.”

“And?” pressed Nykaal gently.

“When I came close to dying several times in the Tilboran uprising, he decided it might be best to find other imagers to work with me. His willingness to try such a strategy has thus far been effective. Part of that also suggests another strength of Lord Bhayar. He is willing to try new strategies and take reasonable risks, but not exceedingly unreasonable ones.”

“He has also followed the example of his sire as well,” mused Nykaal, “in that he requires as much of himself and his family as of others.”

“If not more,” said Quaeryt.

“I doubt that he requires as much of himself as you do of yourself, Commander, not if a fraction of what I’ve heard about you has any truth to it at all.”

“There are always exceptions, Captain,” murmured Vaelora.

“You are both exceptions, but is that not why he trusts you with great responsibility?”

That, and because Bhayar has few alternatives. “I observed years ago that those who are unwilling to undertake tasks which involve danger should not be trusted with great responsibility. Nor should those who go out of their way to seek and surmount danger.” Quaeryt smiled.

“One might suggest that you have sought danger, Commander.”

Quaeryt shook his head. “I have not shied from danger, when necessary, but I have tried to accomplish what was necessary with the

least risk possible. Avoiding risk for the sake of avoiding it may well create more risk in the long run, while accomplishing little."

"You could have destroyed those ships, I think."

"Even if we could have, to what end? The effort required might well have endangered one or more of the imagers. Would you have lost the *Montagne* to destroy all five of theirs?"

"Hardly. I would not willingly lose one of the two great warships Lord Bhayar has for five ships, not when Aliaro has a score or more."

"Exactly," replied Quaeryt.

"Yet you are accompanied by a full regiment, four imagers, and Lord Bhayar's sister on this mission to Khel at a time when Bovaria has not yet been fully subdued."

Quaeryt nodded. "It would have been better to have left earlier, but that was not possible. It is preferable to make offers before the positions of others rulers have been allowed to set."

"I may be less than optimistic, Commander, Lady, but the Pharsi have always struck a hard bargain. They know that Bhayar cannot send his armies into Khel with winter upon us."

"That's true. That is why he sent us."

Nykaal laughed softly, if somewhat uneasily. "You are suggesting…?"

"I'm suggesting nothing. Bhayar would prefer a willing agreement to a forced conquest. If the Khellan High Council will not agree to terms, then, within a few years, there will be a forced conquest. That is why we are going to Khel."

"Your wine is indeed quite lovely," said Vaelora sweetly. "I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your kindness in sharing it with us. That kindness is particularly noteworthy when such a splendid vintage comes dear, and from a family vineyard."

Nykaal froze for just a moment, then blinked … and laughed heartily. "You're most gentle, Lady Vaelora. For that I am thankful. It is a good vintage, and I'm more than happy to share it. The memories I will have of sharing meals with you will be far more dear than the wine." He lifted his goblet. "If you would tell me how Extela fared after the eruption…"

"Of course." Vaelora smiled warmly. "You must know that I spent much of my youth there, as did Bhayar and our sisters…"

More than a glass later, after cheerful conversation, Nykaal slipped away, and the steward reappeared briefly to remove platters and the remnants of the meal.

When they were alone, Quaeryt turned to Vaelora. "Do you think I was too indirect? Or the opposite?"

"I think you conveyed what he needed to understand without actually saying it."

"What? That at times five imagers represent more power than regiments, especially when there aren't enough ships to carry those regiments?"

"You made that point."

"You emphasized it with your sweet comments." Quaeryt grinned.

"People want to know what is happening. They also like to hear what they wish. That has not changed since the time of Rholan, and long before." She paused. "You are like Rholan, in some ways … if the book is correct."

"Oh? I'm like Rholan?"

"Let me see if I can find that section of the book." Vaelora hurried over to the built-in drawers on the right side of the captain's bunk, opening the narrow top one and extracting the small leatherbound volume.

Quaeryt waited while Vaelora paged through the book.

"Here … listen to this."

"Do I want to?"

"Dearest … listen…"

Quaeryt decided further comments and protests were futile. He nodded for her to begin.

Still standing, Vaelora cleared her throat, then put out a hand against the bulkhead to steady herself as the *Montagne* pitched, then rolled slightly. She began to read.

"Rholan's insights often conflicted with not only the views of the powerful, but at times with folk sayings and what some have called common sense. One saying that incensed him was the Montagne fatalism that 'rivers run where they will,' or the observation that rivers run free. In a homily in the small mountain town of Yanaes, according to reports from those who were there, he went so far as to call both sayings complete rubbish. He pointed out that water or rivers always seek the easiest path downhill, and that was why the waters often dropped great distances over falls. He went on to say that rivers were a poor example of guidance or freedom that, if anything, the Nameless provided their twisting courses as an example of how following the easiest path not only often did not take one where one wished, but usually took longer and put one through needless falls and trials. Needless to say, he was never asked back to Yanaes."

"You see?" Vaelora closed the book, but remained holding it.

"Well … it is true that no one wants to ask me back." He grinned.

"Dearest…"

"That's why we need to create a scholarium for imagers. That way, we'll always have some place where we can return when the invitations run out … which they will rather quickly once Bhayar establishes his reign and there's a lasting peace."

“Lasting peace?”

“Well … for a few hundred years, anyway.”

Vaelora frowned.

“It’s simple enough. Once he unifies Lydar, there won’t be anyone to fight here, and no one’s likely to create a fleet big enough to ferry an army large enough to attack…”

“You are an optimist.”

“Why not? It’s less depressing, and it might even come true.”

“Have you told him that he’s supposed to unify Lydar?”

“Of course not. That way, when it’s done, he can tell himself that he never intended to conquer the entire continent. No one will believe him, but they never believe rulers in those matters anyway, and once it’s done, no one will dare to complain.”

“Enough of your grand dreams, dearest.”

“Plans, not dreams.”

“Don’t plan too elaborately. Things never work out as planned.”

“That’s why I just keep the goal in mind. I can always change the plans.”

She shook her head.

Quaeryt wasn’t certain whether her expression was one of resignation, concern, or veiled amusement. *She’s entitled to all three.*

29

While the weather cooled over the next few days, and the wind shifted until it blew largely out of the northeast, the Telaryn convoy saw few other ships, and no warships or raiders. Late on Vendrei morning, Vaelora and Quaeryt stood on the upper sterncastle deck, close by the starboard railing, where they could see in the distance to the north the rolling hills southeast of Kherseilles. The Gulf waters were rougher than they had been, and Vaelora kept one hand on the railing as they talked.

"There aren't many towns or ports along the coast here, are there?" asked Vaelora.

"There are more than a few fishing villages, but that's about it. The southern hills here are rugged. They don't get much rain, and there aren't many streams. From what I've heard, the lands to the north and west of Ephra don't grow much of anything."

"Didn't Kharst do something … you told me about the Pharsi…"

"Oh … according to Major Arion, years ago he drove the Pharsi traders out of Laaryn and marched them to the barrens north of Mantes. Most of them just kept going and crossed the Groral and settled in Khel. That was part of what started the first war against the Pharsi…"

"You told me. That was the one they won, and then Kharst sent all sorts of blankets and goods used by people who'd died of the Red Death." Vaelora shook her head. "Compared to what he did to others, he had an easy death."

Easy? Freezing to death?

"Dearest, you suffer more over what you did than Kharst ever felt from what you did to him. And that was the most he likely ever suffered."

From the corner of his eye, Quaeryt caught sight of Nykaal crossing the deck toward them. "Here comes the captain."

Vaelora turned and the two of them waited.

"It's been a pleasant voyage the last few days," offered Nykaal, with an easy smile. "Well … except for that squall the other afternoon, but it didn't last long. Didn't even break any sheets or rip any sails."

"How much longer to port?" asked Quaeryt.

"If the wind holds, a glass before sunset."

"I've not been in Kherseilles in more than ten years," began Quaeryt. "The port had ample piers then, but…"

"There are still ample piers. Not much else, I'd wager." Nykaal offered a crooked smile. "I doubt that we'll need to anchor offshore."

"Oh?"

“Kharst seized or burned all the local trading vessels. And the Bovarians … or Aliaro…”

“Likely more berths than even we’ll need, then?”

“That’s the word.” With a nod, the captain headed back toward the helm.

After Nykaal returned to his position near the helmsman, Vaelora stepped closer to Quaeryt and said in a low voice, “I don’t like it when you talk as if I’m not here. A few words of explanation wouldn’t have cost you much.”

“I’m sorry. I thought you knew. I didn’t mean…” Once again, Quaeryt was reminded that while Vaelora was a very bright woman, her upbringing had left large gaps in her knowledge. *The problem is that you don’t know where they are, and if you overexplain everything you come off as patronizing and make her look stupid.* “Because Kherseilles was a Khellan port, it’s on the west side of the Groral River. It used to be as big a port as Eshtora and Ouestan, and all the trade in eastern Khel came down the river to Kherseilles. They even built some ships here from the timber that they floated down on the spring runoff. But when Kharst conquered Khel…” Quaeryt shrugged.

“All the traders were Pharsi, and they were killed and their ships burned or taken?”

Quaeryt nodded.

“And there weren’t many people left to trade?”

“Between those who were killed and those who fled, I’d doubt it. That’s another reason why I’ve been worrying about whether we can gather enough mounts for both first company and Eleventh Regiment.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t very well refuse to come on the grounds that your brother couldn’t have made sufficient arrangements for mounts.”

“He wouldn’t have taken that well.” She paused. “There isn’t a Bovarian town on the east side of the river? One where…?”

“There was. It was never a port. Suppose it’s still there, but there’s not much growing in the coastal hills between Kherseilles and Ephra.”

“You just said that. I don’t need repetition. Once is enough.”

“Would you like some biscuits?”

“I can find them myself.” Vaelora left Quaeryt standing there.

He knew better than to follow her immediately. He should have realized that she needed to eat. *She gets cross when she’s hungry, far more than she used to.* He smiled wryly. Another aspect of her being with child that he hadn’t known about until it happened.

Over the next three glasses, Quaeryt spent a great deal of time being pleasant and thoughtful, and making sure Vaelora had frequent biscuits, so that by fourth glass, she was again speaking warmly to

him when they returned to the upper deck to watch as the *Montagne* neared the harbor under minimal sail.

The two long stone piers nearest the river were empty, except for a small fishing shack that was tied almost at the seawall at the base of the pier. Where the warehouses had stood along the stone boulevard behind the seawall and facing the harbor, all that remained were the blackened stone foundations, stretching for almost half a mille. The two smaller piers, the ones that had been timber, had burned down to blackened and weathered pilings. The third stone pier, farther west, was the only one that showed any activity, with a coastal schooner near the end on the east side, and a single-masted craft perhaps twice the size of the *Montagne*'s pinnace.

For all that he thought he was prepared to see what had happened to the harbor, Quaeryt could only look. *There's no way we'll have enough mounts … not with the destruction here.*

"Kharst did all that?" asked Vaelora.

"I don't know. It could have been Aliaro. Once the Khellans were defeated, he could have landed a few ships and fired the entire place. Or it could have been Kharst's men, or factors or officers acting for him. They both wouldn't want an open port here, and in a few years, the Pharsi survivors could have been back trading. They will be, anyway. It'll just take longer."

"They all hate the Khellans that much?"

"I doubt it. Just business. The Pharsi are better traders. So, when the Pharsi couldn't do anything, whoever it was fired the entire port. If they left the warehouses and all the piers, in months some trading would have resumed."

"Lines out!"

As seamen scurried about, sails reefed in, and as Nykaal issued the orders to ease the big vessel up to the stone pier, Quaeryt looked beyond the harbor. From what he could tell, most of the shops and dwellings farther from the water and the river looked to be largely intact, although he did see one or two that had been burned out. There were people on the streets … but only a fraction of the numbers he recalled from when he'd ported at Kherseilles so many years before.

We're supposed to find mounts here? He couldn't help but keep thinking about that.

30

By the time all six ships were secured along the stone piers at Kherseilles, the sun had dropped behind the hills to the west of the port. Although Quaeryt had sent out Zhelan with a squad to look into whether any factors or stables had mounts available … or if anyone knew about Bhayar's purported arrangements, the two stables nearest the harbor knew nothing about such an arrangement-as Quaeryt had feared.

By the time Zhelan had returned, Quaeryt had decided against searching out suppliers of horses-or whoever might have the mounts that Bhayar had purportedly arranged for-until Samedi morning. He only told Vaelora that Zhelan had been unable to locate the mounts and that further efforts would have to wait.

Samedi morning dawned cool and foggy enough that when Quaeryt peered out one of the stateroom portholes he could barely make out the ships at the next pier. "It's a good thing we made port last night. We'd still be out in the Gulf waiting for the fog to burn off."

"You didn't want to talk about the horses last night," ventured Vaelora as she pulled on riding trousers.

Neither did you. "There wasn't much to talk about. Zhelan couldn't find anyone who knew anything. We both worried about that from the time we left Variana. But Bhayar brushed off my questions … and you know how he can be."

"Yes, dear. I do know. I grew up with him."

"I don't think we'll have much fortune in finding mounts for Eleventh Regiment."

"What will you do?"

"What comes most unnaturally to me. Wait to see what happens while Zhelan looks into finding mounts. We might as well have breakfast." He walked to the hatch to the passageway, where he tugged at the bellpull.

"You didn't ask if I was ready."

"I'm sorry. You looked ready."

"You might have asked."

"I'm sorry. I'm worried."

Vaelora opened her mouth, then shut it. "I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to be so sharp with you. I don't know what's come over me."

"Being with child, being hungry, being on a warship in a strange land trying to do things for your brother and your husband where more and more often matters are not proceeding as planned … those might have a little something to do with it. Just a little."

Vaelora offered a faint smile. "They might."

Moments later Nykaal arrived with the steward and breakfast. “Good thing we ported yesterday. The fog looks to be thickening. Sure sign of winter.”

“You sound almost cheerful about it,” said Quaeryt.

“No sense in complaining. The Nameless won’t do anything about it, and the Namer doesn’t care.”

“Spoken like a true captain,” replied Quaeryt, stepping back and letting the steward set platters and mugs around the circular table.

“Will it snow here, this far south?” asked Vaelora, waiting for the steward to set her platter down before seating herself.

“Probably not,” replied Quaeryt. “We’re about as far south as Solis, and we’re on the water. Fog and cold drizzle are more likely.”

“It’s chill as it is.” Vaelora cupped her hands around the mug.

Quaeryt hid a smile. The night before she’d been complaining about how hot she’d felt.

The way she looked at him suggested he hadn’t hidden the smile that well.

“What are your plans, Commander?” asked Nykaal.

“We’ll need to see how many mounts we can round up, and what we can learn about whether the High Council is presently gathered in Khelgror. I’m hopeful that we might get a report from Subcommander Calkoran.”

Nykaal nodded. “I had one of the ensigns check with the portmaster this morning. There weren’t any messages or dispatches.”

After breakfast Quaeryt met quickly and in turn with Zhelan, Khaern, and then the imagers. He dispatched Zhelan to continue looking into the possibility of finding mounts, listened to Khaern’s report on the regiment’s readiness, and told the imagers to stand by. Then he stationed himself on the upper deck, where he could see at least the nearer part of the pier while the fog continued to burn off … and to wait. Vaelora joined him for a time, then repaired to the stateroom. Quaeryt couldn’t blame her. The air was raw, and he wasn’t good company.

Almost another glass passed before he heard the sound of hoofs on the stone of the pier. Then he saw a squad of riders in Telaryn uniforms. Through the drifting fog, he couldn’t make out the officer at the head of the squad, although he had the feeling it might have been Arion. Even before the riders drew up on the pier opposite the gangway for the *Montagne,* Quaeryt was hurrying down the ladders to the quarterdeck.

As the officer walked up the gangway, Quaeryt recognized him. “Major Arion!”

“Subcommander…” Arion looked puzzled. “I did not see you … after the battle.”

The Pharsi's accented Bovarian caught Quaeryt by surprise for just a moment, but he quickly replied in Bovarian, "It left me somewhat … whiter."

"More like the lost son of Erion." The major's eyes went to Quaeryt's collar insignia. "Excuse me, Commander."

Quaeryt decided not to protest anything associated with being a lost one. Not at the moment. "It happened after you left for Khel. If you'll come aboard, we can talk in the captain's stateroom. He's lent it to Lady Vaelora and me."

"Your lady is with you?"

"Lord Bhayar appointed us both as envoys to the High Council."

The dark-haired and black-eyed Arion smiled. "He was wise in that." The smile faded.

Quaeryt led the way to the upper sterncastle and the captain's cabin, then knocked before opening the hatch, a door really, but Quaeryt couldn't help but think of it as a hatch.

Vaelora rose from where she had been writing at the circular table.

"Dearest, might I present Major Arion?"

Arion bowed deeply. "I am most honored, Lady."

"It's good to meet you, Major." Vaelora smiled warmly. "My husband has spoken well and often of you and your abilities."

"He may have been generous, Lady."

"Kind, perhaps," she replied, "but he is honest in his assessments of others."

Quaeryt gestured to the table. "Please sit down."

Once the three were seated, Arion glanced from Quaeryt to Vaelora, then smiled. "Since you are both envoys, I should report … and then deliver a message."

"Please."

"We suffered no attacks on the ride west, but we did not ride far toward Khelgror. We had barely left Kherseilles when a messenger from the High Council reached Subcommander Calkoran. The Council requested that we ride to Saendeol to meet with them."

"Where is that?" asked Quaeryt.

"A week's ride north and west of here, in the warm hills. It was the old winter meeting place of the High Council, back in the times of my great-great-grandmere. Even then, they did not like to meet in the winter ice and snow of Khelgror."

"How long were you there?"

"More than two weeks before the subcommander dispatched us to await you."

"It sounds as though he wanted to make certain we were met as soon as we arrived," said Quaeryt. "Are … there difficulties? How has

the Council received Lord Bhayar's suggestions?"

"They have not shared their views on what Lord Bhayar proposed. They were less than kind to Calkoran for presenting them."

"What did they expect? Is he all right?"

"Thank you for asking. He will be pleased that you inquired about him. He is in good health, but some have accused him of being a traitor, especially the … Selenorans."

"Selenorans?" asked Vaelora.

"The believers in the moon goddess-Artiema. They believe Lord Bhayar is the agent of Erion, and that Artiema, and Khel, must never be hostage to the Great Hunter and lesser moon."

Quaeryt shook his head. "Then they do not understand the world as it is."

"Is not that why Lord Bhayar has sent you both?" Arion's words were wry.

"It might have something to do with it," Quaeryt admitted. "Matters have not gone as well as we might have wished. We were attacked by Antiagon ships on the way, and we've had a little difficulty in locating mounts." Quaeryt kept his voice bland.

"That is not surprising. As soon as the High Council read Lord Bhayar's message, they issued an edict forbidding the sale of any horses to anyone from Telaryn, Bovaria, or Antiago."

"I understand why they might do that," Quaeryt said. "I can also say that it might not have been the wisest of decisions."

"They doubt that Lord Bhayar will soon send an army to Khel, not when he has not fully conquered Bovaria."

"They're right. He won't. But he does not forget, and if he does have to send an army…"

"Calkoran suggested that. They did not believe him."

"What do you suggest, Arion?"

"The High Council has agreed to meet you in Saendeol. I think you should do so. They have sent with me enough mounts for one company." He paused. "And for the undercaptains."

"We only brought four of them. The other four are in Bovaria with Submarshal Skarpa's forces."

Arion raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, I did bring Lhandor and Khalis, as well as Horan and Baelthm."

The major nodded.

"When do you suggest we depart?" asked Quaeryt.

"When you are ready."

"This afternoon at first glass?"

Arion smiled. "You do not wish to tarry."

"Lydar cannot afford delays. Or other mistakes. Neither can

Khel."

"Then I will have the mounts here at noon. Did you bring saddles and riding gear?"

"We did." Quaeryt stood. "Thank you for all that you've done. We look forward to talking with you on the ride to Saendeol and hearing what else you've learned."

Arion rose quickly. "I do as well, sir. Until later, sir."

Once the major left the *Montagne,* Quaeryt summoned Khaern and requested that Nykaal join them as well.

The ship's captain arrived first, but only a fraction of a quint before the subcommander.

When Khaern entered the stateroom, he inclined his head first to Vaelora, then Quaeryt, and then Nykaal. "You requested my presence, sirs and Lady?"

"Please have a seat." Quaeryt gestured to the vacant chair at the circular table. "You may have heard that we've had some difficulty obtaining mounts."

"There's been some word about that, sir."

"You may also recall that Major Arion served under me before he was dispatched with Subcommander Calkoran to suggest an agreement with the High Council of Khel. He rode into Kherseilles a short time ago with his company. He informed me that the High Council has effectively prohibited the sale of any horses to anyone not serving the High Council. The Council is willing to provide us enough horses to mount up first company-and Lady Vaelora and the undercaptains-so that we may travel to Saendeol to meet with the Council."

"If I might say so, sir, that doesn't appear to be the most conciliatory of acts on the part of the Council."

"That was my first thought," replied Quaeryt. "Yet, from their point of view, landing two warships and troops in Kherseilles might not be considered terribly conciliatory, either." He turned to Nykaal. "What are your thoughts on the matter, Captain?"

"You're not going to make that strong an impression with one mounted company. On the other hand, I doubt that they can force us out of Kherseilles."

"I wouldn't want it to come to that, for a number of reasons. What are the arrangements for the merchanters?"

"Their contract is over once your troopers disembark, and they'll leave on that night's tide, I am more than certain."

"And your orders?"

"Both the *Solis* and the *Montagne* are to support you for so long as you require."

"Will that be a problem in terms of supplies?"

"No, sir."

"Then it appears that our immediate course is set."

Nykaal frowned, if briefly. Vaelora nodded.

"I have no mounts for Eleventh Regiment, and no way for Eleventh Regiment to return immediately to Ephra or Geusyn. We are charged with meeting with the High Council. They are amenable to meeting. So first company, when appropriate but as soon as practicable, will ride to Saendeol to meet with the Council. I'm planning on departing at first glass this afternoon."

"With but one company?" asked Nykaal. "You can't even be certain that the Khellan battalion won't attack you if their Council decides you're a danger."

"They've seen what the commander can do, sir," replied Khaern, "and they're not stupid enough to bring his wrath down on them."

Nykaal frowned. "But if they believe that…"

"Why doesn't the Council?" asked Quaeryt. "Because no one believes much of anything until they get burned or watch someone else get burned, frozen, or otherwise destroyed. Some don't even understand when they do see. Those are the ones who have to experience it firsthand … and too many of them don't learn from the experience because they don't survive it."

Nykaal still wore a puzzled frown.

"Captain, there are forty thousand dead Bovarian troopers and officers," said Khaern. "That doesn't include a rex and most of his court. There's scarcely a building left standing in a space three milles wide and a mille deep. You probably think I'm telling tall tales. I'm not. My men had to help bury all those bodies. So did the Khellan troops."

"If you're wondering why we didn't do something like that to the Antiagon ships," added Quaeryt, "there wasn't any need to, and it's better to save extreme measures for extreme situations." He smiled. "Now … we need to discuss how you feel we should handle the *Montagne* and the *Solis*."

"I'd prefer to have one at sea off the harbor at any time. The Antiagons have been known to sneak in vessels and fire them before they could raise sail."

"That shouldn't be a problem. You and Khaern can work out details for what troopers you need aboard. First company, Lady Vaelora and I, and the imager undercaptains will be riding out at first glass. We will send dispatches, although I doubt that you'll learn much until we reach Saendeol. Unless you have any questions, several of us need to ready ourselves for another ride." Quaeryt glanced sideways to Vaelora, and the two of them rose.

31

By a quint past first glass, Quaeryt, Vaelora, and first company were riding away from the pier and the *Montagne*. Arion had insisted that Quaeryt ride a large black gelding and Vaelora a matching black mare.

So long as it's not a white stallion, Quaeryt had thought when he'd saddled the gelding.

Arion had not brought all of fourth company to Kherseilles, just two squads, both of which rode rearguard, while Zhelan dispatched first company's second squad as the vanguard, with scouts from both first company and from Arion's squads. Quaeryt and Arion rode on each side of Vaelora, with Khalis and Zhelan following, and the other undercaptains after them.

As they rode away from the burned-out warehouses that still lined the harbor, Quaeryt began to count the houses and shops that appeared ruined or vacant. After three blocks he stopped. Roughly one in every three or four structures appeared deserted and looked to require significant repairs to make it livable once more.

"Did all the destruction happen during the war?" asked Quaeryt.

Arion laughed harshly. "Almost none of it did. There weren't any battles fought here in the south. Kharst just marched an army from Laaryn to Khelgror, and then shipped forces to Ouestan and Eshtora. Those forces closed the ports and waited. Factors from all over Lydar descended on Kherseilles with their own guards and armsmen and took whatever they wanted. Sooner or later, that happened to all the port cities. It happened sooner in Ouestan and Eshtora. After the Red Death, we did not have enough men to send to every port, so we fought the Bovarians near Khelgror. We fought until we had but a few companies left. We almost won, but there were too few of us. Once we were defeated, they removed any Pharsi factors who had survived and replaced them with people of their own. Except in the coastal hills in the west, they didn't create high holdings. Anyone who complained was executed. For any Bovarian trooper or functionary who was killed, they killed five people at random. So … troopers and factors began to disappear. For every Bovarian who vanished, they killed three people."

"How many troopers or factors vanished, and then reappeared?"

"That happened once or twice. After that, they still killed three people-and they also killed the people who vanished if they showed up again."

"How many of the people are left?" asked Vaelora.

"The Red Death took one in three. The war took one in four of

those remaining. The factors and the troopers that supported them took one in four from those survivors-and then those who remained killed all the troopers when we learned that Bovaria had fallen to Lord Bhayar. That cost us many people, mostly women."

Quaeryt attempted to make the calculations in his head. "Based on those numbers, today you have about four out of every ten who lived in Khel ten years ago."

Arion shrugged. "It is what it is."

"Do you know why the High Council is opposed to Lord Bhayar's terms?"

"They have not spoken to me, or to any of us who served under you-except for Subcommander Calkoran."

"Then tell me why you think the Council opposes Lord Bhayar's rule."

"Wouldn't you?"

"I might have ten or fifteen years ago. Today … no."

"They do not see it that way. They trust no one. Many would rather die than be ruled by an outsider. The Selenorans believe Lord Bhayar would be as bad as Kharst, if not worse."

"Would that be so even if the Council were given some authority for what happens in Khel?"

"There is a saying about a ruler's promise lasting less time than a black coney in winter."

"Is a black coney the sign of bad luck?" asked Quaeryt.

The slightest hint of a frown crossed the major's face. "Not that I know … well … there is the saying that he who hunts only black coneys will soon starve."

"For more reasons than one, I'm sure," said Quaeryt dryly. "How is Captain Stensted doing? And your men?"

"All are healthy, and all are pleased to be back in Khel."

"But … there are some matters that are unclear?" suggested Quaeryt. "Such as whether your allegiance is to Lord Bhayar and how long you'll be paid, especially since there are few coins indeed in Khel? And since you agreed to fight against Rex Kharst and he's dead?"

"Those things have been mentioned."

"I thought they might have been," replied Quaeryt.

Arion said nothing, but kept riding, avoiding looking at either envoy.

"Lord Bhayar did promote Subcommander Calkoran. To me, that suggests he believes all of you are still serving him and will be paid as such. Unless, of course, that allegiance is repudiated. I imagine the High Council sees it that way as well, and that could place the subcommander in a difficult position. A most difficult one."

“He has said as much to me.”

“But not to Major Zhael, I would guess.”

“I do not know, but Zhael has said nothing.”

“So you’re to find out what you can?”

Arion grinned, somewhat sheepishly.

“I think Bhayar would like to keep paying you all for as long as you would serve him.”

“That would mean Khel would become part of Telaryn.”

“That is his hope … and mine. I do not think the future of Khel will be very bright without Bhayar’s support.”

“Would you turn against Khel, Commander?”

“I’m not interested in turning against anyone. Lady Vaelora and I are here to try to find a way that Khel can agree to become part of Telaryn so that all Lydar is united and there will be no more wars among its people.”

“Do you think the Autarch Aliaro will accept that?” Arion’s skepticism was more than clear.

“One way or another, he will.”

“You mean dead or alive?”

“It might come to that. I would not wish the same for Khel.”

“How can Bhayar promise a fair rule when he does not yet even control all of Bovaria?”

“I’d like you to think about that for a while, Major. And I hope the Council will as well.” Quaeryt smiled warmly. “In the meantime, can you tell me a little about the Selenorans? I’ve never heard anything about them.”

“There have been those who believe in the power of the moon goddess since as far back as there has been a Khel. Much longer, I would think. Most of them are hunters and herders and stay far from the cities and larger towns. The most dangerous are the Eleni, the wise women to whom the others listen and who tame the great eagles to hunt for them. There are tales … they are only tales … but you do not wish…”

“Tell me of the tales,” said Quaeryt. “If they oppose a union of Khel and Telaryn, I should know more of them and why they are so opposed.”

“In the time of the first great council, the first of the High Councils, the people of Moryn sent a councilor to them who was said to be a hand of Erion.” Arion paused. “You did say…”

“Go on.”

“This councilor wished to extend the laws of the High Council to the wild ones, the ones like the Eleni, who lived away from the towns, and cities, and even the hamlets. He refused to listen to the Eleni who approached him and who claimed that they lived under the laws of

Artiema and that they had no need of the laws of the High Council. Three times, the wise women of the Eleni approached him, and three times he turned them away. When he dismounted below the Mound of Truth and began to walk up the steps of truth, one of the great eagles appeared in the sky and swooped down upon him and killed him with a single blow.

"The eldest of the Eleni appeared at the foot of the steps and declared that the same fate would befall any man-even a hand of Erion-who dared to act without even the grace to talk to the Eleni. Then she vanished where she stood, leaving the councilor's body on the stones." Arion shrugged. "Many say that his death proved he was no hand of Erion. Others say that his death proved that Erion was indeed the lesser moon."

"Are there other tales such as that?"

"Many," said Arion. "Khel is an old land, perhaps older than Telaryn."

"There's little doubt of that," agreed Quaeryt. "Go on."

"Most are of lesser happenings, but all show the power of Artiema and the Eleni. In the time of my great-grandmere, a Ferran factor seized the daughter of a Eleni herder and tried to take her back to his factorage in Eshtora. She pleaded to Artiema, and the factor was struck by a dark thunderbolt, and she escaped."

"Another eagle?" asked Quaeryt.

"I would think so, but my grandmere-she was the one who told the story-insisted it was a black thunderbolt…"

"How does one tell who is of the Eleni … truly?" asked Vaelora.

"By their deeds. Sometimes by their garb. They are always black-haired, and the huntresses wear red leather shoulder rests for the eagles and red leather gloves."

"Have you ever seen one?"

"Twice, from a distance as a boy. I had no desire to get closer."

"Are there any other stories?" asked Quaeryt.

"My friend Reybaal told me that he saw an Eleni huntress turn aside a mounted company. He did not see what she did…"

Just outside Kherseilles, the column turned onto a narrow road-but an ancient gray stone paved way that looked all too familiar to Quaeryt. He looked to Arion. "This is an old, old road. Was Saendeol once the capital or a leading city of southern Khel?"

The major looked quizzically at Quaeryt. "Where have you heard this? I said nothing of that."

Quaeryt smiled. "The road told me."

Arion smiled in return. "What did it tell you, Commander?"

"The stones are all the same size. They are the same size and shape as the stones used by the Naedarans in the south of Bovaria, yet

I have seen no other stone like this used in the walls and buildings of Kherseilles. The road is the same width, and has been here for a long time, but there is little trace of wear. The walls of Nordeau were built in a way that suggested the builders feared imagers, but the early Bovarians had no imagers. Also, roads are built by people with power, and they connect places of power. The stone piers at Kherseilles are old and of stone. You told me that Saendeol was where the Council once met. Therefore…"

"Therefore … what?"

"The old ones of Khel had imagers. They likely fought with the Naedarans, and Saendeol was a place of power." Quaeryt shrugged. "Or it could be that the old ones of Khel came from Chelaes and Naedara. Perhaps they did not agree with the old ones of Naedara. But there is some sort of tie."

"Because of the stones?"

"Are there buildings in Saendeol built of gray stone like this?" Quaeryt gestured toward the road.

"There are a number."

"Aren't they all older buildings?"

"They have been there for years."

"Tell me, Major, where there is a quarry from which these stones could have come?"

"I do not know of any, but I am from the north."

"I take it that this road goes all the way to Saendeol."

"Yes, sir."

"Does it go anywhere else?"

"No, sir." Arion looked directly at Vaelora. "You have said little, Lady Vaelora."

"For all that you two have said, you've both talked past me, not to me."

Quaeryt winced, but said gently, "You could have spoken. You don't need to defer to me … as you've pointed out on a number of occasions."

Vaelora laughed softly and turned to Arion. "He is right about that." After a pause she went on. "I said little because I mostly agree with my husband. He knows that I will let him know if I don't. I worry more than he does, I think, that the High Council will not look to the future because the past few years have been so painful. Rex Kharst was a terrible ruler. He was cruel to Khel and the Pharsi, but he was cruel to all of his own people as well, save for a few favorites. My brother has been firm as a ruler, but he has been as fair as he could be. My husband has not agreed with everything Lord Bhayar has done. No honest man will ever agree fully with another, even another man who is honest and fair. But Quaeryt believes Bhayar is the best ruler

for Lydar, and he believed that before he and I ever met. I can also tell you that the people of Khel have no greater champion than Quaeryt. My husband would not wish me to say this, and my brother certainly would not, but the Council would be foolish to waste Quaeryt's support and skill." She paused once more. "What else could I say?"

Arion shook his head. "I have felt all that you say, and I have said it to those who will listen, but I have not been allowed to speak to the High Council."

"The more fools, they," said Vaelora tartly. "You've seen what Bhayar and Quaeryt have done, and what they have not done. It is one thing to be cautious. It's another to be deaf and blind."

Quaeryt managed to keep a pleasant expression on his face as he continued riding.

32

By Samedi night Quaeryt, Vaelora, Arion, and first company were far enough from the waters of the Gulf that the evening breeze was more than chill. When they broke camp on Solayi morning, a fine white frost coated the browned grasses bordering the stone road, as well as the grasses of the open meadows between the stands of bare-leafed trees. In its construction, the road reminded Quaeryt of the ancient Naedaran stone roads, but there was one principal difference. The Naedaran roads Quaeryt had seen had largely followed or paralleled streams, canals, or rivers. The one on which Arion guided them did not, but appeared to have been laid out more directly through the hills to the northwest of Kherseilles. While it followed a stream now and again, that appeared only because the stream happened to be where the ancient road builder had wanted the road, and not the other way around.

On Lundi evening, they stayed the night in an abandoned and not quite ruined stead-a place Arion said that he and his men had used on the ride from Saendeol. On Mardi evening, just before fifth glass, they arrived in the town of Rheon, set in a gentle valley flanked by vineyards, where, once again, a number of the houses appeared abandoned, although Quaeryt got the impression that the empty houses were more on the order of one in ten, rather than one in three or four, as they had been in Kherseilles.

Arion led the column along the stone-paved road that had become the main street of the town until he reached an open square, where he turned eastward and rode toward an oblong two-story building that had to be an inn.

As Quaeryt and Vaelora followed the major past the signboard in front of the building, Quaeryt found he could read the letters on the signboard, but had no idea what the words meant, although, in a way, he felt he should, since they were Pharsi. *That just shows how lost you are.*

"One of the two towns between Kherseilles and Saendeol with a proper inn," Arion announced as he dismounted in the courtyard.

"What's the name of the inn?" Quaeryt asked, gesturing back toward the signboard.

"It means 'the warm hearth' or 'the welcome inn.'"

"I have some golds," Quaeryt said, "but my funds are far from unlimited."

"He'll accept whatever you offer."

"A copper for each man for lodging, two for the officers, and three for each meal?"

“He’d find that more than fair, especially since the men will be in the barns and stables.”

“Is there anyone here who doesn’t speak Pharsi?” asked Vaelora.

“No one who would likely admit it at the moment,” replied Arion. “Some also speak Bovarian. Almost no one speaks Tellan.” He turned and began to talk to the stable boy, who had hurried across the paved courtyard from the open stable doors.

Quaeryt swung down from the black gelding, then held his hand out for Vaelora. Surprisingly, she took it, if but for a moment, as she dismounted.

“You should meet the innkeeper,” said Arion. “If you would follow me, sir, Lady…” The Pharsi major guided them toward the side door of the stone-walled inn.

Sandstone, not gray stone, Quaeryt noted as he eased Vaelora after Arion. He did extend his shields to cover her, just to be careful. The side door opened on a narrow corridor leading to the main hallway off the public room.

Arion offered a greeting in Pharsi as he neared the main entry hall, and in moments a dark-haired, honey-skinned man appeared from somewhere in the back of the inn. After an exchange of words, the innkeeper bowed slightly to the major.

Arion spoke a few more words, and the innkeeper turned from Arion to Quaeryt and Vaelora. He froze where he stood. His eyes widened, and then he bowed, and offered a welcome, one of the few Pharsi phrases Quaeryt knew.

Quaeryt offered a short reply in Pharsi, then had to add in Bovarian, “Thank you, but I was orphaned young and did not learn Pharsi beyond what I knew as a small boy.”

“I … understand,” the man replied in Bovarian, but his eyes fixed on Vaelora, and he bowed even more deeply, offering a more voluble greeting.

Vaelora responded with a longer phrase, and then a second, before finally saying, in Bovarian, “Those are what my grandmere taught me.”

Arion stepped forward and began to talk to the innkeeper once more.

The man finally nodded, smiled, and said in accented Bovarian, “Most welcome you both are.”

“Thank you,” said Quaeryt, this time in Pharsi, one of the few phrases he’d learned from his Pharsi undercaptains on their long rides.

“My daughter … honored lady … she will show you … the way.”

A young girl appeared, perhaps ten, and stepped carefully toward Vaelora. She stopped a yard short and bowed, then gestured for Vaelora to follow her.

Quaeryt followed the two several yards past the main hall and then up a set of stone steps. Halfway up, one step was a bit higher than the others, and the longer boot heel on Quaeryt's bad leg caught the edge of the riser, and he stumbled and almost fell before catching himself-and almost jamming the two immobile fingers on his left hand. At the top of the staircase, the girl turned to the right and walked to the end chamber. There, she opened the door and stepped inside, gesturing for Vaelora and Quaeryt to follow.

The chamber was modest, floored in slate tiles, with clean white plastered walls, and a double bed, with a table, an armoire, and an alcove set off by a decorative screen that held a wash table and basin and other items. The large window had no curtains, but a set of dark-stained inside shutters, swung open to admit the light.

Once they were alone, Quaeryt asked, "Do you know what the innkeeper said to you?"

"I didn't catch all of it, but he called me 'Seliora,' and I know that's the daughter of the moon. There's something about the two of us together that surprised him."

"I think I'll ask Arion while you wash up, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind, dearest. Take your time."

Meaning, don't hurry back. Quaeryt slipped away, closing the heavy door, and headed down to the courtyard, where he found Arion and Zhelan directing the men and mounts. He stood back in the shadows of the inn wall, watching and not wanting to interfere. Once it was clear that they had finished, he stepped forward. "Arion?"

The Pharsi major turned. "Yes, sir."

Zhelan also turned, clearly interested.

"I don't speak much Pharsi … almost none, as you know. It seemed to me that the innkeeper was referring to Vaelora as the daughter of the moon … and that he was surprised that we were together. Or did I misunderstand?"

Arion laughed softly. "You didn't misunderstand, but he said more than that. He said that few had ever seen a hand of Erion-that's the old way of saying a son of Erion-and fewer still had seen him with the daughter of the moon."

"He didn't look exactly happy about it, not at first."

"When the two are seen together, according to the old tales, it foretells great change. Great change," Arion added sardonically, "usually means war, famine, or disaster … if not worse."

"And you told him?"

"That you two had come in hopes of making that change as peaceful as possible."

"I hope the High Council sees it that way."

"So do I. So does Subcommander Calkoran."

"Let's hope we can convince the Council. What can we do about getting the men fed?"

"Your three cooks will help in the kitchen, and they'll feed the men two squads at a time, beginning in half a glass. There's a table in an alcove at the end of the public room that will seat ten…"

"That would suit the officers and Vaelora and me," suggested Quaeryt. "That's nine. We could eat together, once the last squad is fed."

Arion looked to Zhelan.

"I can take care of this," replied Zhelan. "It'd be best if you talked to the innkeeper."

When Arion had reentered the inn, Quaeryt asked, "What do you think?"

"Seems straightforward to me. Ostler and stableboy know their business. Place is one of the cleanest inns I've seen. No one looking away. Everyone's cheerful. One of the serving girls was flirting with Undercaptain Khalis. He was trying not to blush. Lhandor rescued him."

"Whether he wanted to be rescued or not, I imagine."

"He needed to be rescued. She had her blouse down so far…" Zhelan shook his head.

"He's a handsome young man, and sometimes too courteous."

"Except in battle … or protecting you."

Quaeryt didn't contradict the major. He recalled Khalis hovering over him when he'd been flattened by a cannon powder explosion.

Once the men and mounts were settled, Quaeryt walked back into the inn. As he headed toward the stairs, he saw one of the serving girls looking at him. He smiled back and started to turn when he saw a man in dark gray leathers lean toward the serving girl and murmur something. The girl replied, and the man stepped away. There was something about the exchange that troubled Quaeryt, but he couldn't have said what.

He kept walking and returned to the room, where he washed up. Then, at half past sixth glass, he led Vaelora into the public room, down one side past the tables where the last two squads were finishing their meal. He did catch a few murmured remarks.

"… wouldn't be letting my sister ride with us…"

"… would if *he* were guarding her…"

"… heard the innkeeper near-on filled his britches when he saw her … called her a moon goddess or something…"

What Quaeryt did hear confirmed his faith in the ability of troopers to find out far more than their commanders ever intended.

The officers at the table all rose as Quaeryt and Vaelora approached. They had left vacant the two places in the middle of the

table on the side closest to the wall. Quaeryt eased Vaelora into the seat beside Arion, while he sat between her and Zhelan.

"What are we having for dinner, Arion?" asked Quaeryt.

"Lamb. What else? For a Pharsi, the best meal is always lamb. The lamb tonight will be stew with mushrooms and potatoes and spices. With fresh-baked rosemary bread and red wine."

The wine carafes were already on the table, and Quaeryt filled Vaelora's goblet and his, then passed the carafe to Arion, who handed it back to Zhelan. The first casserole dish was set before Vaelora, but Quaeryt served her and himself, and then the two majors. That was deliberate, especially since he could see the innkeeper watching.

The daughter of the moon should be served first, especially in Khel.

Once all the officers were served, Quaeryt lifted his goblet. "I'd like to offer a toast, and thanks, to Major Arion, for his guidance and his knowledge … and for finding a good inn."

For a time thereafter, there was little conversation, but after a bit, Quaeryt turned to Arion. "What is the road like from here to Saendeol?"

"Much like it has been. If the weather holds, we should reach Saendeol by Samedi evening."

"How large a place is it?"

"Perhaps twice the size of Rheon. It does have more inns. There was little destruction."

"Why was that?"

"There is little of great value grown there, and no mining, and the Bovarians like to trade by canals and rivers."

Others asked a few questions after that, and Arion was more than happy to tell the officers about Khel.

Quaeryt and Vaelora mostly listened.

As they rose after eating, Quaeryt leaned toward Vaelora. "I need to talk to Khalis and Lhandor."

"I would have suggested it, if you hadn't."

Quaeryt gestured to Lhandor, the nearest of the two. "I'll need a moment with you and Khalis after I escort Lady Vaelora to her chamber. If you'd wait here."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt escorted Vaelora through the public room and then up the stairs, again shielding her until she was inside their chamber. "You will bolt the door."

"Yes, dearest. I'll even unbolt it when you return."

"I'd hope so."

"There are times, dearest, when you hope too much."

Quaeryt let the wince show.

She lifted her hand to stroke the side of his face. "Do what you

must and hurry back."

Quaeryt returned her smile. "I will." But he waited outside in the hall until he heard the bolt slide into place.

The two Pharsi undercaptains were waiting at a table in the corner of the public room. Quaeryt gestured for them not to rise and eased a chair into place across the table from them. "As you both know, I speak little Pharsi. I have little idea what's being said. What have you heard?"

"I don't catch everything," replied Khalis. "They speak a bit different here, but you scared the innkeeper when you came into the inn and took off your cap and he saw you and the lady together. The serving girls were whispering about it."

"One asked me if you were a lost one," added Lhandor, "or maybe an ancient."

"An ancient?"

"One of the old Pharsi from the east."

A Naedaran Pharsi? "Were there Pharsi in Naedara?"

Lhandor shrugged. "I don't know. There are tales that the oldest Pharsi fled into the west."

"I never heard that," said Khalis.

"My grandmere talked about them. My father told me not to believe her, that all good Pharsi came from the west."

Quaeryt nodded. In that light, the road and some of the legends made sense. "Did they say anything else?"

"One of them asked me why all your hair and your nails were white, if you painted them to look like the son of Erion. I told her that your hair and nails turned white, that it was part of the price you paid for calling down the ice on the armies of Bovaria. It was, wasn't it?"

"It was," Quaeryt said quietly. *But only a part.*

"She got real quiet then. The other one whispered something about telling her father. I got the idea he might be the innkeeper."

"Was there anything else?"

The two shook their heads.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd keep listening. Any little thing could be important."

"Because of the High Council?" asked Khalis.

Quaeryt nodded. "I don't want Lord Bhayar to bring an army into Khel. The Pharsi don't want that. We'd all be better off if we can work something out."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt could sense the doubt in their voices. "It won't be easy, but it's something we have to find a way to do." *Because that's best … or because you don't want to destroy thousands more?* "Thank you both. I'll see you in the morning."

With a parting nod, he turned and headed back to the room … and Vaelora.

When he had bolted the door, he walked to the armoire and sat on the stool, where he began to pull off his boots.

"Dearest … I've been thinking…"

"Yes?" he replied warily.

"There isn't anyone, except perhaps the Autarch, who can threaten Khel. By defeating Kharst, Bhayar has removed the threat of Kharst. Weak as it is, Khel poses no threat to Telaryn or Bhayar. Not now. Why are you going to press the Council to accept Bhayar's agreement?"

"Besides the fact that he dispatched us to do so?"

"If it's not a good idea, it's not a good idea."

"You're right about that, but uniting Khel and Telaryn is a good idea, even if the Council doesn't like it."

"Go on. Tell me why. You'll have to tell the Council why."

Quaeryt turned on the stool to face Vaelora, who sat on the end of the double bed.

"First, Khel can't protect itself from the factors who flee Bhayar and move to Khel, especially those in the north and west of Bovaria. If Khel doesn't accept Bhayar's terms, he certainly won't have any interest in pursuing those factors. Why should he protect Khel from them? Second, what's to stop traders from Jariola or Ferrum or other places from trying to establish themselves in Khel? If they do, and it's against the interests of Telaryn, then Bhayar will have to do something in the future. The Khellans certainly won't like that. Third, if Khel accepts his terms, the Pharsi will have Bhayar's protection, under law, against factors and others who try to exploit them, and they will have the ability to trade freely throughout all of Lydar except for Antiago. That will make them far more prosperous.

"Equally important, Khel can get better terms now because, sooner or later, he will take over Khel. If he has to fight to do it, Khel will suffer far more than it already has. If the High Council agrees to terms he can accept, then there's no war, and everyone benefits."

"That makes sense … and they won't agree," said Vaelora sadly, glancing toward the window and shivering.

Quaeryt rose and walked over to close and fasten the inside shutters. Then he turned back to face her in the dim light. "I'm afraid you're right. Do you have any better suggestions?"

"Not tonight, dearest."

Later, much later, outside the window, even with the inside shutters closed, Quaeryt could hear the wind and the beat of heavy rain on the roof and the walls of the inn, but his mind drifted back, time and again, to the same words.

What can you do to persuade them? The question kept circling in his thoughts, and yet he had no answer-none at all.

At some point, he finally drifted into sleep with the beating of the rain on the walls and the roof.

33

Quaeryt woke abruptly in the darkness and turned toward Vaelora. She wasn't there. He ran his fingers over the covers, but the bed was empty, except for him, and the sheets were like liquid ice. He bolted upright and looked toward the alcove behind the screen, but there was no one there, either. The door was still bolted, and the shutters were closed, tightly fastened, just as he had left them.

Where could she have gone?

The chamber was so cold that his teeth began to chatter as he kept looking around, but he knew better than to try to image warmth. *No telling what damage that could do.*

Where was Vaelora? He threw back the blankets and stood. The stone tiles under his bare feet felt like ice, but he walked to the armoire. Surely she couldn't be hiding there. He opened it, and all he saw were clothes. From there he went to the screen, but the washing area was vacant.

He turned back and looked at the bed again. He could see the rumpled blankets where he had been lying, but the covers were smoother where Vaelora had been. Had she gotten up earlier? But how could that have been?

He walked back to the bed, then turned as a glimmer of light seeped into the room from the closed shutters, followed by streams of silver light flowing through the shutters of the window … and then the shutters melted away to reveal the figure of a man with hair like flowing silver, standing at the end of a road of reddish silver that stretched into the night sky. In one hand he held a dagger with a blade of brilliant light. Across his back was a mighty bow, and in his other hand was something shimmering so brightly that Quaeryt could not determine what it might be … a key, a small book, a coiled chain of gold…?

The silver-haired figure smiled at Quaeryt, almost sadly, before he spoke. "You cannot hold a daughter of the moon, for not even a son of mine can do that."

"I haven't tried to hold her," Quaeryt protested.

"You have not. So far … but women and lands cannot be held against their will, not and prosper. Nor can you force peace with a blade or even the power I have given you. You can only stop others from fighting by destroying them or by the threat of destruction. The absence of fighting is not peace. It is only the absence of fighting that may resume at any time."

"But why won't they see?" Quaeryt finally asked.

"Do not argue over what is not and may never be," said the silver-

haired man.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You have heard those words before. You know their meaning more than most."

The light faded, and Quaeryt shivered a last time, then realized that Vaelora was sitting up beside him.

"What was that light?" she asked sleepily.

Light? "There was light? I thought I was dreaming it." After a moment he said, "You're here. You're really here?"

"I am indeed. You were talking to someone, but there's no one here."

"I had the strangest dream…" Quaeryt shook his head. "You were gone, and Erion was standing in a flow of silver light before the window. He told me … that I could never hold you … because you're a daughter of the moon."

"Of course you can. You do every night."

"No … he was right. You choose to stay, but if you chose to go, I couldn't hold you."

Vaelora took his hand, the left one, with the two fingers that could feel but not move, and held it. "Isn't that true of you as well? I could never hold you against your will, even with Bhayar behind me."

"But I want you to hold me."

"That's not the same thing," she said softly, "and you know it."

"He also said that lands and women were the same, that with all the power I had been given, I could not force peace. That I could only use destruction to stop fighting for a short time. He was right about that … too."

"If it was a dream, you were telling yourself that."

"Was it a dream?" he asked. "You saw the light coming through the shutters."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, then put her other arm around him. "Does it matter? Truth is truth."

Tired as he was, Quaeryt felt as though more than a glass passed before he drifted back into sleep and uneasy dreams.

When he woke the second time on Meredi morning, close to sixth glass, Quaeryt thought, he walked to the window and unfastened the shutters. A wave of coldness radiated from the thin panes, completely covered with frost. He scratched away enough of the frost to peer out and to see that white covered the hills he could barely make out over the roof of the stable, and that gusting flakes continued to fall, swirled here and there by the wind. Through the swirling flakes, he found it hard to tell just how much snow had fallen or was falling.

"What is it?" asked Vaelora.

"Snow, and it's still snowing." Quaeryt refastened the shutters and

turned back to face her. “We’d best get washed and dressed and see how bad it is.”

“Should we be traveling through a snowstorm?”

“Probably not, but it’s hard to tell from here if it’s a light passing storm that’s almost over, or the beginning of something bigger. I’d like to see and to talk to Arion and Zhelan. The sooner we get to Saendeol, the better, but we don’t want to be frozen to death on the road.”

Vaelora sat up, the covers drawn around her. “Have you thought about your dream?”

“Not much,” he protested. “I just woke up. Have you?”

“Only that it means you shouldn’t force the High Council to agree to Bhayar’s terms, even if it means Khel will not be a part of Telaryn so soon.”

“So soon?”

“It will happen. Of that, I am convinced.”

“Just as you were convinced we would be together?”

“I knew that it would be so.” She smiled.

“Have you had any farsight visions on this? On Khel becoming part of Telaryn.”

“No, but I feel it will be so. Without force.”

Quaeryt fingered his stubbled chin. “What is force? What’s the difference between persuasion and force?”

“You know very well, dearest. So does every woman.”

“There sometimes is a narrow line…” He grinned.

“Only men think it’s narrow.” Vaelora sniffed.

Quaeryt knew she was teasing … slightly. He sighed, loudly. “We need to get dressed.”

Once he had washed and shaved … and dressed, pulling on his winter riding jacket and lined gloves last, he ended up pacing around the chamber.

“Stop pacing!” snapped Vaelora. “Or wait for me downstairs.”

Quaeryt forced himself to sit down and not to say a word. Nor to sigh or groan.

Finally, in less than half a quint that felt like a glass to Quaeryt, Vaelora was ready, and they walked from their chamber down the corridor and the steps into the main entry hall. Recalling his near mishap of the night before and feeling a certain stiffness in his bad leg, Quaeryt was especially careful on the steps.

Both Arion and Zhelan were standing, talking, by the front doors to the inn. In the side corridor leading to the stable courtyard, Quaeryt noticed a man in gray leathers, talking to an older gray-haired man. Neither looked at him.

At that moment Zhelan turned. “Commander … we’ve been talking. The cooks are feeding the men, but I don’t like the look of

things."

"Let's walk outside," suggested Quaeryt.

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt grinned. "I know you two have already looked, but I've only seen it from the window."

"It doesn't look any better outside," replied Zhelan.

Arion nodded.

"At least give me the illusion of being in charge." Quaeryt nodded to Vaelora, then held the door for her as they stepped into the gusting winds and swirling snow.

Once outside, he looked up and down the street. The snow hadn't piled up that much, only a digit or two, if that, but there were small drifts deeper than that against the inn and the walls of the other buildings Quaeryt could see. On the other hand, he didn't see any riders or wagons anywhere on the street.

"If you walk downhill, to your left, sir," said Zhelan from behind Quaeryt and Vaelora, "you can get a better view of the hills."

Quaeryt stayed close to Vaelora, holding shields around them both as they walked down the edge of the paved road a good fifty yards so that he could look across a meadow that showed some brown grass protruding from an uneven cover of snow. Through the swirling snow that was lighter than it seemed, he could just barely make out the outline of the hills to the west. Even through the falling snow, he could see that the higher hills were definitely snow-covered, although it was difficult to tell just how deep the snow was.

"What do you think?" Quaeryt turned to Arion.

"It doesn't look like that heavy a storm, now, but the sky to the north is darker. That's where it's coming from. It might not get worse, but you can't tell. Were I you, I wouldn't hazard men and mounts."

Quaeryt chuckled. "And if you were just you, traveling with your squads?"

"I'd stay here and wait for the weather to change."

Quaeryt looked to Zhelan. "Major?"

"I'm with Major Arion."

Lastly, Quaeryt looked to Vaelora, who nodded. "Then that's what we'll do. Let's head back to the inn and let the undercaptains and the men know."

They turned, and the majors stepped aside to let Quaeryt and Vaelora lead the way. After they had walked fifteen yards Vaelora pointed past the inn. "There's a woolens shop up there."

"How can you see that?" murmured Quaeryt.

"I can always see the important places."

He wasn't about to respond to that.

"If we're not traveling today, I can see what they have."

"I'm sure that you can, dear."

"Dearest … that sounds patronizing … disrespectful, my brother might say."

Thankfully, Quaeryt could hear the teasing note in her voice. "I'm being most respectful. I agreed that you could visit the shop."

Quaeryt and Vaelora turned toward the front door of the inn, some ten yards away. Just then a strong gust of wind swirled a wall of snow at them, strong enough that Quaeryt's shields diverted the snow, leaving them untouched as they walked toward the inn.

At that moment Quaeryt saw the two bearded men in leathers, the younger of whom had pointed at them. *More likely at seeing the snow avoid us.*

"Why are those two men looking at us?"

"My shields diverted that gust of snow. They saw it."

"I didn't notice that." Vaelora paused, then said, "They're both wearing leathers. Didn't Arion say something about that?"

Quaeryt frowned, trying to recall. "Oh … he said that the Eleni hunters, the women, wore red gloves and red leather shoulder rests."

"They're definitely men," said Vaelora.

"And not wearing red leather," Quaeryt pointed out.

Quaeryt watched as the two men reentered the inn, but by the time he and Vaelora had reached the door and stepped inside, neither of the men in leathers were anywhere to be seen.

"Since we're already up, and the men have been fed, we might as well eat some breakfast," suggested Quaeryt.

"I could use some tea. Then … what do you have in mind?"

Quaeryt said nothing.

"Besides that."

"We could walk around Rheon and get an idea of the town … and of Khel."

"You'll need a very long walk."

"If we're going to see the town and all the woolen shops, then I'll need a solid breakfast." Quaeryt turned toward the public room, followed by Arion and Zhelan.

"You will, dearest," murmured Vaelora.

Quaeryt shook his head.

34

Although the clouds began to break by midafternoon on Meredi, there was no point in starting out so late in the day. There had also been little gained by Quaeryt's and Vaelora's walking through Rheon, since there had been nothing significant to distinguish it from small towns elsewhere in Lydar-except for the woolen shop, which, Quaeryt had to admit, did have bolts of tightly woven cloth with patterns he'd not seen elsewhere.

By Jeudi morning, the air had warmed, and the snow had begun to melt. By the eighth glass the road was mostly clear, although the hillsides still held snow, and Arion proclaimed that the weather would only warm. Quaeryt wouldn't have wanted to ride on the roads of Bovaria-most of them, anyway-but the gray stone road was indeed clear in all but the most shaded of spots. As Arion had predicted, the innkeeper had been surprised, astonished, it appeared, at the five golds he had received from Quaeryt, and he bowed profusely-if with great relief, Quaeryt suspected.

Less than a glass after leaving Rheon, they came to a shady area dusted with snow. Arion's scouts called a halt and requested that Quaeryt and Arion come forward to look at the tracks in the snow.

"A single rider," said the scout. "He was moving faster than a walk through here earlier today because there's been no wind. Yesterday … would have been covered with blowing snow, most likely."

"It couldn't have been a dispatch rider looking for you, sir, could it?" asked Arion.

Quaeryt shook his head. "Couriers always travel with at least two escorts. Khaern would have sent at least that many."

"Wonder who it could have been in such a hurry in this weather," mused Arion. "Don't see many single riders on the roads these days, especially not at the beginning of winter."

"We could set the scouts another hundred yards farther ahead," suggested Zhelan.

"That can't hurt," agreed Quaeryt. *Hoofprints in the snow headed northwest, toward Saendeol and whatever lay along the way. Just a coincidence?* He had no way of knowing.

They kept riding, and Quaeryt kept pondering, but by midday the road was clear everywhere, although the wind from the west was still chill, if no longer as bitter as it had been earlier. The scouts reported no one, and there were no other signs of riders.

That night, they found quarters of a sort in a small town set in a wide valley that was so flat it might once have been a lake. Vendrei

morning was warmer, with skies almost clear, except for a faint haze. The wind had shifted from the north to the southeast and had become more temperate, giving a more autumnal feel to the air, even though the fields through which they rode were either brown or stubbled.

Slightly after midday, as the fields gave way to sparse grassland with scattered bushes and trees, Vaelora turned to Arion and asked, "How much farther to Saendeol? How many days?"

"Tonight we will stop in Sovahl," replied Arion. "It is at the foot of the Deol Hills. From there it is a ride of five or six glasses to Saendeol."

"For what is Sovahl known?" asked Quaeryt, not that he was supremely interested in one town over another, but because any knowledge would be valuable.

"Gemstones. The hills to the north of Sovahl hold many kinds of precious stones, and the gem merchants of Sovahl are known for their ability to cut and to shape those stones."

"Why didn't Kharst occupy Sovahl, then?"

"He did. Rather, the factors who had purchased stones from Sovahl hurried to Sovahl. They found nothing, except empty buildings. Gems, even the largest, are small, and one has to know what they look like before they are cut. The tools to cut are small. Everyone fled into the hills. Not all have yet returned. Some may never return, except to sell stones."

"They just left? And no one chased them?"

"You will see," promised Arion with a laugh. "You will see."

By midafternoon, as they neared the hills to the north and west, the almost barren grasslands gave way to low, rugged, and rocky rises with little greenery except occasional scrub junipers and squat pines, with stretches of sand between the rises, various scattered bushes, and sparse stands of wild grasses, now bent and brown.

"Not exactly the most hospitable place," observed Quaeryt, leaning forward in the saddle to stretch his back. "I think I can see why the Bovarians didn't have much success in chasing down the gem dealers. Are the hills around Saendeol this desolate?"

"They are dry, but not so dry as here," replied Arion.

"And there's a town ahead?" asked Vaelora. "Where? It doesn't look like there could be anything here."

"Another glass or so, I would judge."

Vaelora raised her eyebrows.

Smothering a smile, Quaeryt asked, "Were these lands greener a long time ago?"

"I do not know. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered. This is a very good road. It was built a long time ago, yet you tell me it only runs from Saendeol to Kherseilles,

and there's nothing here except a few towns, and herders and gem miners and merchants."

"Saendeol was once very important. It was also the capital of Jovana, when what is Khel was three lands."

That was something Quaeryt had not heard. "How long ago was that?"

"Before the time of the lost ones, generations before. I cannot say. Remember I come from the north and west."

Quaeryt still thought that the lands of the south had once been more lush, but it was clear that what Arion knew about this part of Khel was limited.

Another glass passed before Arion spoke again, smiling. "The edge of the town is just ahead."

The road began a gentle descent into lower ground running between two sandstone buttes, each about twenty yards back from the road and rising no more than thirty yards above the road. Each one was shaped like a squarish ridge that extended some two hundred yards or so, Quaeryt thought. He frowned. There wasn't a building in sight … except he saw thin trails of smoke rising into the midafternoon sky in places-from the buttes themselves. Then, between the buttes he saw sandstone-paved lanes leading off from the gray stone of the road.

"The town … it's carved into the stone itself?"

"It is. Many of the chambers were cut out even before there was a road, or so they have told me."

As the column of troopers and officers neared the "town," Quaeryt could see openings cut into the reddish sandstone, on two and sometimes three levels. Some of the "dwellings" or "shops" carved out of the sandstone were vacant and had been so for some time, with shutters either missing or hanging askew, or with vacant oblongs on the ground level where doors had been. Still, most seemed to be occupied in some fashion or another. The brown-stained shutters flanking those windows or openings that had shutters were anchored into the sandstone itself.

After they had ridden several hundred yards past the first inhabited stone chambers, Arion gestured for them to follow the scouts to the right down a wide sandstone paved lane. Ahead of them and to their left, sculpted out of the stone, was a pointed arch rising some ten yards, and in the center of the base of the arch were double doors, brassbound and half open. Shuttered windows set some two to three yards apart extended for some twenty yards on each side of the arch, with three levels of windows. At the south end of the "building" toward which they rode was a set of wide stable doors.

"Welcome to the Stone Inn," said Arion as he reined up outside

those doors from which two young men hurried out. “I did tell them that we’d likely be back.”

“How far back does that stable go?” asked Quaeryt.

“To the other side of the butte. That way they get fresh air. The last part, well, those are really just tunnels big enough for the horses, with iron grates on the eastern end.”

“You’ve actually looked?”

“I rode back there with a torch. It’s dark after the stable proper ends before you get to the far end, and you can feel the air moving.”

Quaeryt could see Vaelora shiver, but she said nothing.

“I think we’d like a chamber with a window,” suggested Quaeryt.

“Oh … all of them do. They run along the front on all three levels. They use the chambers on the inside for storage and other things. We’d best dismount and see the innkeeper. They get offended if we don’t greet them first.”

“By all means,” said Quaeryt, easing himself out of the saddle. By the time he turned to Vaelora, she was already standing beside him.

They followed Arion to the brassbound doors in the middle of the sculpted stone arch. Three men emerged, two younger, who stood behind the older man, presumably the innkeeper.

Arion nodded politely and spoke several phrases.

The innkeeper smiled, and nodded in return, replying with several much longer phrases.

He was a wiry man, his skin darker than that of most Pharsi and weathered, who looked old enough to be a grandfather. His eyes scarcely moved to Vaelora, which surprised Quaeryt. Instead, he inclined his head deeply to Quaeryt and spoke once more.

Quaeryt didn’t understand a word.

“He says that he is pleased that a son of the north has come to grace his inn, and he will offer all that he can for your favor,” said Arion.

“If you would tell him, in the proper phrases, that we appreciate his hospitality and add whatever else is customary and proper.” Quaeryt wasn’t so certain he wanted to promise favor without knowing what that entailed.

Arion spoke for several moments, and the innkeeper smiled and inclined his head, then gestured to the young men and spoke again.

“They will show us our places while the men stable the mounts and unload. We will eat in about a glass.”

In moments Quaeryt and Vaelora were inside the sandstone inn, where the corridors were narrower and shorter than he had expected, only a little more than a handspan above his head, and Quaeryt was not that tall a man. The chamber that Quaeryt and Vaelora shared was smaller than he expected, no more than three yards by four, with two

windows a yard and a half apart, each slightly more than half a yard wide. There were no inner shutters and no hangings. The furnishings consisted of a thick pallet on a stone platform that was part of and rose from the sandstone floor. There were two stools, a washstand, a chamber pot, and a set of pegs protruding from the wall. Covering the bed pallet were heavy woolen blankets woven in designs of black and white. There was a coarse linen or cotton undersheet, and two thin brownish towels, one on each side of the washstand.

"This is not Rex Kharst's canal boat," observed Vaelora.

"No. It's not even the inn in Geusyn."

They looked at each other and laughed.

After washing up as best they could, Vaelora stretched out on the bed, such as it was, on top of the blankets.

"It's not that uncomfortable. It doesn't sag, anyway, not like the inn in Laaryn."

"You never said anything about that," replied Quaeryt.

"I didn't think I had to. Besides, it wasn't as cramped as the boat."

"How old do you think this is?"

"Older than I think I want to know."

Sitting on the edge of the stone bed, Quaeryt smiled at that.

A quint later they made their way down to the public room, a chamber large enough to hold all of first company and Arion's two squads, with several of the long trestle tables still empty. The stone ceiling was supported by columns of stone that had been left in place when the space had been cut, in irregular places. The columns were darkened with the smoke of ages.

"More lamb?" asked Quaeryt as they seated themselves at a table with the other officers, one set off partly in a stone alcove with a narrow stone window above one end, through which cool air flowed, for which Quaeryt was grateful, given the smoky air.

"No. Goat, most likely," replied Arion. "The land is hard even for sheep, and the goat will be sliced thinly or chopped and cooked for a long time. But it is good."

"What is there to drink?"

Arion gave a rueful expression. "Here you have a choice of a bitter beer-I would not call it ale or lager-or fermented goat's milk." He paused. "The beer is safer, I think."

Quaeryt glanced at the column behind Arion, carved with figures in a circular scrolling pattern that rose almost to the ceiling. He saw men and horses, hunters with bows, a merchant bestowing what looked like a gem to a man in elaborate garb. What he didn't see were any women.

"I've been looking at the carvings in the stone. They look to be old, and there aren't any women shown."

“You’re among the southern hill people here. They’re not truly Pharsi, and the stories say that they were here from the beginning. Unless you know them well, and they trust you totally, you never see a woman, and seldom a girl.”

As if to emphasize that, the servers were all men, and they set the same stoneware bowl, filled with a stew, as well as a stoneware mug, in front of each officer and Vaelora. There were two large pitchers on the table, one sandstone red, and the other white.

“The red is beer,” explained Arion.

The stew was tender, tangy, and not especially spicy, with a touch of mint and a spice he’d never tasted. The beer was so bitter that Quaeryt had to force himself to drink even a swallow of it. Then he imaged away the local brew and replaced it with the lager with which he filled his water bottle, adequate but not particularly good. But then, he didn’t know enough about brewing to image superb lager. Even so, he did the same for Vaelora and was rewarded with a thankful smile … after a briefly puzzled expression crossed her lips.

When he looked down the table, he thought that Khalis had done the same thing, and suggested it to Lhandor. While he couldn’t read their lips, the looks on their faces when they glanced at the pitchers and the comparative ease with which they lifted their mugs suggested they were having little difficulty drinking what was in them.

“How was your stew?” he finally asked Vaelora.

“Not bad … especially with the … change in beverage,” she murmured back.

“I thought it might help.”

“It did. I just hope it’s not necessary for the remainder of the time in Khel.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I hope we can get a good night’s sleep this evening.”

Quaeryt did not miss the slight emphasis on the word “sleep,” but he smiled anyway.

35

As the undercaptains formed up on Vendrei morning outside the Stone Inn stable doors, Quaeryt rode over to where Khalis and Lhandor waited, almost stirrup to stirrup.

"How did you find the local beer?" he asked, smiling.

Khalis looked to Lhandor.

Lhandor laughed softly. "It was awful, sir."

"But I noticed you two were lifting your mugs rather often."

"So were you, sir," replied Lhandor. "How did you find it?"

"As you did," Quaeryt said pleasantly. "You seemed to find a way to deal with it. Water, wine, ale, lager … what did you manage?"

Khalis grinned ruefully. "Berry juice and water. I tried to image lager, but it was worse than the beer."

"And you?" Quaeryt looked to the other Pharsi undercaptain.

"Piss-poor lager, sir, but better than the beer," replied Lhandor.

"What's in your water bottles?"

"Piss-poor lager," replied Lhandor.

"Good," said Quaeryt. "Keep your eyes open today."

"More so than usual, sir?" asked Khalis.

"Call it a feeling." Quaeryt nodded, then eased his mount forward to rejoin Vaelora near the head of the column. He was pleased that the two youngest imagers were widening their skills, and not just at his urging.

As Quaeryt and Vaelora rode away from the Stone Inn, Quaeryt could see the innkeeper and the two younger men standing just outside the stone arch over the entry, watching impassively as the column of troopers passed. Very few of the doors in the sandstone cliffs that held the rest of the town had any signboards, but many of those that did bore letters or symbols that Quaeryt did not understand, leaving him with the feeling that they had not so much as ridden through Khel but through a part of Lydar's distant past.

Just north of Sovahl, the road turned almost due west up a gently sloping dry valley that was little less than a half mille across at its base. Quaeryt saw no sign of any dwellings, nor of livestock or even of goats. Yet the stone road ran straight as a quarrel up the middle of the valley that held only sparse grass and bushes, and little enough of either.

"Tell us more about Saendeol," prompted Quaeryt. "How big is it? What are the buildings like? The land around it?"

Arion shrugged, then gestured at the stony and near-barren hillsides on each side of the valley. "The land is much like this for the next fifteen milles or so. They call it the stone desert. After that, there

are pines and other trees on the heights, and there are tall grasses, good forage in places. There is a small river that runs through the long valley that holds Saendeol. There are many apricot orchards, and the brandy they make from it is well known. The traders of Jariola send ships every year to Pointe Neiman to buy kegs of it."

"What about the buildings?" asked Quaeryt. "Are they hollowed into the stone?"

"No. The oldest are built of the gray stone like the road. The newest are of sandstone, but they look the oldest."

"Are there council buildings that are also old?"

"There is only one council building. It stands on top of a round hill, and it is round as well. I do not know what lies inside."

For the next several glasses, they rode along the old stone road, as level and as well crafted as any of the Naedaran roads and showing less wear, with scarcely a crack or a fissure, through the dry hills until they came to a rise with a scattering of trees, which included bare-limbed broadleaf trees as well as the previous scattered pines and junipers. When they reached the crest of the road, Quaeryt could make out below a moderately wide valley, sprinkled with the orchards of which Arion had spoken, as well as hundreds of houses and buildings set well back from a narrow river. From the highest point on the road, Quaeryt estimated that it dropped almost two hundred yards over several milles as it angled down the comparatively gentle slopes to the base of the valley.

"There is Saendeol," said Arion.

"The houses aren't that close to the river." That was Quaeryt's first thought.

"That would not be wise. At times, the spring floods are wide and violent. The buildings are all on higher ground."

That was another confirmation of the age of Saendeol for Quaeryt.

As they rode down to the town, Quaeryt noted that, unlike most towns, the streets were straight and either parallel or perpendicular to the river, creating regular oblong blocks. The buildings all appeared roofed in gray stone or tile. It took him a half quint to locate a building that met Arion's description of the council chamber, because it was on the west side of the river, directly at the end of an avenue leading westward from the single bridge over the river. There were no other structures on the round hill, and the hill was encircled by a stone avenue as well.

Near the bottom of the incline, still a mille or so from the nearest buildings of Saendeol, a handful of riders in the green uniforms of Telaryn rode toward Quaeryt and first company. As they drew nearer, he recognized Subcommander Calkoran.

“Welcome to Saendeol,” called the Pharsi officer as he reined in his mount beside Quaeryt and Vaelora. “And especially to you, Lady.” His eyebrows lifted slightly.

“Lord Bhayar named her as envoy as well,” said Quaeryt.

“He promoted you as well, sir, I see. Well deserved, for both of you … and necessary.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re here to escort you.”

“Where would you suggest we stay?” asked Quaeryt.

“There is a compound to the north of Saendeol. It once held armsmen, but it has not been much occupied in recent years. We have made it usable. The main house is in good repair. We have saved that for you and Lady Vaelora,” said Calkoran. “It is to the north.” He gestured, then urged his mount forward gently.

Quaeryt refrained from smiling at the smoothness with which Calkoran had moved from being surprised at Vaelora’s presence to his immediately accepting her presence. “We need to talk once we’re where we can discuss matters.”

“Yes, sir. We do. There may be … some difficulties.”

Calkoran’s mention of difficulties suggested that matters were not about to run even close to smoothly, but Quaeryt didn’t want to pursue those yet. “How was your journey here?”

“Arion told you, did he not, that we did not travel to Khelgror?”

“He did. He said that the High Council was meeting here. Do you know why they decided to do that?”

“They have not said, but we have asked, as we can, for although we are Pharsi, we wear the colors of Telaryn, and we are not trusted.” There was a slight edge to the subcommander’s voice before he barked a laugh. “They will not trust you, either. As Pharsi we distrust all we do not know. That is one of our curses, and few indeed are left who knew any of us.”

Quaeryt had the feeling that Calkoran had almost said more, but had refrained.

The first houses they neared were built of a pinkish gray sandstone, but had bluish gray slate tile roofs. They were not particularly large, perhaps ten yards by five, but neatly kept. As they entered the town, Quaeryt could see no unoccupied buildings or houses, for the first time since they had arrived in Khel. He also noted that every street was stone-paved, although some of the side streets had sandstone paving blocks with wagon grooves worn into them. The streets and the walks flanking them were not empty, but neither were there more than a few handfuls of people visible, and only two carts and a single rider. None of them gave the Telaryn force more than a passing glance.

Quaeryt found that both surprising and puzzling.

After riding less than ten blocks into the town, Calkoran gestured to a gray stone street heading north. “That is the way to the compound.”

Before long, they had left the neat stone houses behind and rode through an area with orchards on each side of the road. After about a mille, they neared an enclosure of gray stone walls two yards high.

“That is the compound.”

“It looks old,” said Quaeryt.

“It has been here so long as anyone can remember,” replied Calkoran.

Quaeryt nodded. The fact that it was on the north side of Saendeol suggested it had been built to deal with threats from the north when Jovana had been a separate land and Saendeol its capital.

The stone paving continued through the gray stone posts that bore no gates. The only sign of a road to the north was a clay track, showing little sign of use, that diverged from the paved road some fifty yards before the posts and continued northward. Beyond the gates was a paved courtyard fifty yards on a side with two long buildings south of the paved area, and two north. A single dwelling was set on the west end of the pavement. The dwelling was stone-walled, as were all the buildings, with the same slate tile roof, but was square, with eaves that extended almost two yards, allowing the roof to cover the narrow porch that ran all the way around the building. The windows were comparatively wide, and glassed, with equally wide gray shutters, now open.

“The dwelling is for you and the lady. The second long building on the right is for your officers and men. The stables are at the end.”

Quaeryt turned in the saddle. “Major Zhelan … you have command. Settle the mounts, men, and officers as necessary.”

“Yes, sir.”

Calkoran, Quaeryt, and Vaelora rode straight across the paved entry square and reined up just short of the three stone posts with bronze hitching rings.

“Just inside there is a sitting room on the right, a study on the left, then a parlor on the right and the dining chamber across from it,” said Calkoran. “Both have doors to the porch. Then the kitchen and serving areas are on the left, and two sleeping chambers on the right, one large and one small.” The subcommander nodded. “By your leave, sir, I will return shortly.”

“Thank you.”

After Calkoran rode off, Quaeryt dismounted and tied his mount. Vaelora did the same, and they walked up the three stone steps to the stone-tiled porch and inside the small entry hall, which had doors on

each side, and a narrow corridor leading straight back.

Two women appeared, bowing gracefully, and speaking in Pharsi.

Despite the fact that Quaeryt spoke no Pharsi beyond a handful of phrases and that Vaelora's knowledge was most limited, in a short time they had unloaded their gear and put it in the larger bedchamber, a room some four yards by six, with a small attached bathing chamber.

"The bed looks far better than the one last night," observed Quaeryt.

"The headboard is beautiful," murmured Vaelora.

Quaeryt had to agree. The oiled wood was the color of honey, but had the feel of great age, and he had to wonder if it had once been almost white. Above a center section of plain wood was a carved scene of men and women working in an orchard picking fruit and placing it in baskets, with carts at each side. Beside the carts were neatly stacked arms-bows, arrows in quivers, and lances laid upon the grass in rows.

"A bit of symbolism, there," he observed. "A good harvest, with arms at the ready."

"The Pharsi culture?"

"From what I've seen and heard … most likely."

Through the open window, from which flowed a cool but not chill breeze, Quaeryt heard hoofs on the stone. "That's likely Calkoran."

A few moments later they stood in the study of the modest dwelling, where Calkoran rejoined them. Quaeryt did not sit, nor suggest that they do so.

"Before we talk about the Council … you have a cook and a maid here for you. It is best that the lady not eat with the men, but we have set up a mess for the troopers and officers."

"I'm a bit confused," said Quaeryt. "You didn't know that the Lady Vaelora was coming, but now you're saying that she shouldn't eat with the men."

"Not if she is to be treated as your equal as an envoy. That would indicate she is not *Eherelani.*"

"*Eherelani*?"

"Of the wise women … the ones to be revered. They eat alone or with family or equals. They are few." Calkoran paused. "I would have suggested the same for you, sir, had you been the sole envoy."

"What can you tell us about the *Eherelani*?"

"They often have the sight … the visions … one of the High Councilors is *Eherelani.*" Calkoran shrugged. "The *Eherelani* speak only to whom they wish."

Quaeryt could see he wasn't about to learn more about the wise women, not from Calkoran. "What about supplies?"

“The High Council has been kind enough to provide provisions.”

“We will need to thank them.” Quaeryt paused, then asked, “When should we meet with the High Council, and what should we know?”

“The High Council will meet with you tomorrow, I would think. I will make certain, but Councilor Khaliost said they would talk to you on the morning after you arrived. The others … I am here on sufferance.” Calkoran shook his head. “They believe that Khel will never fall again, that without the Red Death it would not have happened.”

“The Red Death may have caused its fall,” said Quaeryt, “but how many would be left if Bhayar sent his armies into Khel?”

“The question they will not ask, sir, is whether you will lead those armies.”

“I would rather it not come to that. If the armies come, there will be great destruction that I cannot prevent, and there will follow a horde of factors and traders. If the High Council agrees to terms Lord Bhayar will accept, there will be no armies, and that will leave Khel free to deal with any hordes of factors.”

“Do you know that?”

“That is what he has told me. In fifteen years he has never lied to me.”

“Would that other rulers could have that said.” Calkoran laughed ruefully. “They will not believe you, you know?”

“That is what we fear. How many armsmen do they have here?”

“None, except for us. The people in the town have arms. All Pharsi in Khel do, but there are few men left to wield them, and not that many young women. Still, the older men and women could fight. They would not do well against armsmen, and I think they would prefer not to fight.”

“Do you think they’re stalling, waiting for some sort of reinforcements?”

“I would think not, but as I told you, they trust me not, and they have told me little.” Calkoran snorted. “We fought and fought, first here, and then later … to bring down the Bovarians … and they will say little.”

For the first time, Quaeryt could sense anger and exasperation on the subcommander’s part, and he certainly couldn’t blame the man. “They owe you more than they know.”

Surprisingly, Calkoran shook his head. “If a Pharsi of Khel acknowledges a debt, he will do much to repay it, but no Pharsi likes to be told he owes a debt when it was not his own choice to incur it. Nor will a Pharsi trust a man who has not done as he promised, no matter why.”

“What did you do?” asked Quaeryt, involuntarily, wishing he hadn’t as he did, and quickly adding, “Even when you all fought to keep Kharst from conquering Khel?”

“I did my best, as I saw it, and I failed. There is no debt in failure.”

“But you returned to help destroy him.”

“They only grudge my presence, I tell you, Commander.”

“Can I find a way to make it not so?”

Calkoran’s smile was wintry. “I hope so, but I have my doubts.”

“We’ll think it over and talk in the morning. Seventh glass?”

“I will be here. If you need me sooner, we are in the barracks to the south.” Calkoran inclined his head.

After Calkoran left, Quaeryt turned to Vaelora. “Did you notice that no one in town was interested or surprised to see us?”

“Calkoran’s men have been riding through town for weeks. That might be why.”

“That’s possible, but it still bothers me.”

“What else bothers you?”

“Calkoran being here on sufferance because he failed to stop the Bovarians.”

“Pharsi can be very stiff-necked, dearest.”

I do know that. “The other thing is that everything is too quiet. We’re expected. Everything is in order.”

“You think that they plan a surprise?”

“I don’t think they plan an attack, but I suppose it’s possible.”

“Why don’t you go talk to Zhelan and the undercaptains while I wash up?”

“You have a double purpose in mind.”

“Of course.”

“But bolt the door while I’m gone.”

“I will.”

Quaeryt smiled wryly as he left the bedchamber on his way to the barracks or whatever the building in which first company was quartered might have been called.

36

By the time Quaeryt had finished discussing matters with Zhelan, then asked the Pharsi imagers to listen to everything they could, and returned to the building that had likely been the compound commandant's quarters, Vaelora had washed and changed. He did the same, and they repaired to the parlor, graced by matching wall hangings on the interior facing walls, one showing an empty courtyard garden in spring and another depicting the same garden in fall. They had barely seated themselves in armchairs before the serving maid appeared and spoke.

"I think we're being called to dinner," said Vaelora.

They rose and followed the maid across the narrow center corridor into the dining room.

Colored hangings were centered on the end walls, finished in an off-white plaster, as was the bedchamber. The table and chairs had been crafted from the same honey-colored wood as the bedstead in the main bedchamber. Into the back of each chair was carved a tree, a different variety, Quaeryt thought, from a quick glance. Two places were set, across from each other at the end of table farthest from the curtained archway to the kitchen.

The serving maid gestured to the seats, ambiguously, and Quaeryt guided Vaelora to the one facing toward the windows, although he could not have said why, seating her before he seated himself.

The serving maid half filled the two heavy goblets with a clear liquid from a pitcher, beginning with Vaelora. Then, setting the pitcher on the table, she slipped through the curtained archway to the kitchen, returning in moments with two bowls, placing one first before Vaelora, and then the other before Quaeryt. When she finished, she inclined her head to Vaelora. After the slightest hesitation, Vaelora nodded in return, and the server retreated behind the curtain, although Quaeryt had no doubt that she was still observing them.

"You're positioning me as the superior," Vaelora said quietly. "Why?"

"I can't explain, not in a logical way. It's just a feeling."

"Like why it's better that I don't eat with the officers and men?" asked Vaelora. "I've been doing that all the time. No one said anything in Sovahl, and I was the only woman there. No one in my family ever mentioned anything about that. I've never heard of either *Eherelani* or Erlani. Not before now, I mean."

"Neither have I."

"You still haven't said why you're deferring so obviously to me."

"As I said … a feeling … and because your great-grandmere was

likely an imager with the farsight who had enough power to sleep alone."

"That's not the same." Vaelora sipped the clear liquid in her goblet. "This is good."

"Better than the beer in Sovahl?"

"Much better. I can't say what it is, but it's strong." She set the goblet down.

Quaeryt sipped from his goblet. "I'd guess that it's a white ice wine of some sort."

"Are these *Eherelani* the same as the Eleni that Arion mentioned?"

"I don't know. I'll talk to him in the morning before we meet with Calkoran." He looked down at orangish liquid in the bowl. "Do you want to try the soup? I think it's soup."

"The spoons are thin … too thin for soup. These look like the bowls … you're supposed to use the bowls like cups and sip it right from them."

"Something you remember?"

Vaelora nodded, then lifted the bowl.

Quaeryt followed her example. The soup tasted like a combination of apricot and squash, a mixture that was almost too sweet for him.

Vaelora, on the other hand, was smiling when she finished her bowl. "That was good. It tastes familiar, but I can't remember…" She shook her head.

"Something from when you were a child?"

"Probably."

Although Quaeryt had not finished the soup, and did not intend to, as soon as she was through, the server returned and removed the bowls, then appeared with two platters, again serving Vaelora first. On the platter were parchment-thin slices of dark meat, interspersed with equally thin slices of what appeared to be cheese of some sort, both covered with a light orange-colored glaze.

After his experience with the soup, Quaeryt looked at his platter closely. Vaelora had no such trepidation, taking the angular knife and equally angular two-tined fork in hand, cutting off a section, and eating it. "You should try this, dearest. The meat is some kind of fowl, I think, a little strong, but the mixture with the cheese and the apricot glaze is quite good."

Quaeryt took a much smaller morsel than she had. While he would not have been quite so enthusiastic as his wife, he did have to admit that the combination was in fact rather tasty, and better than the goat stew of the night before. "What kind of fowl, would you think?"

"Something not too tame. The meat's rather dark."

Quaeryt took another sip of the clear ice wine, if that indeed were what it happened to be, and found that it cleared the taste of the main dish. He took another bite, and it tasted better than the first … or he was getting used to it. "What do you think of the house?"

"It's much better than most of the quarters we've had. The furnishings show good crafting and taste, but…"

"But what?"

"It's a little … cold … as if … well … as if no one really lived here."

"That could be because it's been used as guest quarters. Still, that raises another question. This dwelling has been kept up. Why? For whom? Especially if Kharst was ruling all of Khel."

"It would have to have been as quarters for guests of the High Council, then," replied Vaelora.

"That would mean that Kharst never really controlled more than the larger towns and cities, then, and there has been a shadow Pharsi government here for years, most likely for the entire time Kharst claimed Khel."

"Wouldn't that make sense?" asked Vaelora.

"It would, but it's going to make our job harder. Much harder. Unless we can get the High Council to agree to a unified system of government, Bhayar will have even more problems than Kharst did."

"Because he can't seem to be weak, but doesn't operate through fear and terror?"

Quaeryt nodded.

When Vaelora had finished eating, the server appeared and removed both platters, reappearing immediately with smaller plates. On each was a small pastry, with a flaky crust, garnished with mint leaves that had been marinated in some liquid. The dessert turned out to be honeyed pastry folded around a nut-apricot filling, and drizzled with a sweet mint syrup.

"The cook has gone to great lengths on this dinner," Quaeryt said, "as has the server."

"They don't want to offend us."

"Or you," he added.

"How much do you think they worry about what Bhayar might do?"

"They do worry, I'd guess, but they'll try to avoid committing to anything without creating more reasons for Bhayar to attack. At the very least, they'll want time to rebuild Khel."

"Once Bhayar's made a decision, he's not likely to change his mind."

"No." Quaeryt shook his head slowly. "That's something we both know."

After they finished eating, Quaeryt stood, moved to the other side of the table, and eased back Vaelora's chair as she rose. "I'd like to look at each room before we retire."

"What are you looking for?"

"If I knew," he replied, "I wouldn't have to look."

She laughed gently as they moved from the dining room back to the front sitting room, sparsely furnished with an upholstered settee, two armchairs, two side tables, and a narrow sideboard before the window. The honey-colored wood had been used for all the furniture, and for the interior window shutters. As in Sovahl, there were no curtains or hangings flanking the windows. On the single interior wall without a window or a door was another hanging, this one displaying a vineyard in harvest, with golden grapes, some in baskets, some still on the vines, but without a single person.

The front study also featured the same honey-wood furniture, but the single interior wall was comprised of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, although there were only a few dozen volumes. Quaeryt removed several and opened them. One was written in Bovarian, the others presumably in Pharsi.

Later, as he lay in the darkness beside a sleeping Vaelora, his thoughts circled back, time and time again, to the same question.

What are you missing?

37

Quaeryt woke early on Samedi morning with at least a partial answer to the question that had plagued him the night before.

"That's it," he murmured as he sat up in the bed.

"What's it?" murmured Vaelora.

"Except for this headboard"-he gestured-"have you seen a single picture, sculpture, or carving of people since we came to Saendeol?"

Vaelora frowned, then turned to study the headboard. "You can't see any faces here."

Quaeryt turned and looked at the carving on the top of the headboard. He hadn't noticed that before, but the figures were depicted in such a way that no facial features were shown. "You're right."

"What do you think that means? That showing people's faces gives others power over them? Or that the Pharsi here in Khel feel that it's disrespectful?"

"It could be either, or something else altogether. That's another question for Arion," Quaeryt said, turning and sitting on the side of the bed. "How soon do you think breakfast will be ready?" Even as he finished speaking the words, he laughed.

"Why are you laughing?"

"That was a stupid question. Breakfast will be ready as soon as the Lady Envoy indicates that she wishes it."

"*That,* dearest, is most disrespectful." Vaelora tried to pout.

"You don't pout well," he said with a grin, standing.

"That's because…" She shook her head, then eased the covers aside. "If the Commander Envoy requires breakfast, I suppose the Lady Envoy should wash and dress."

Quaeryt had to admit she was far better at the arching tone of mockery than pouting.

Breakfast was indeed ready in moments from when Vaelora emerged from the bedchamber. The meal consisted of fluffy eggs cooked in a cheese mixture, a small almost crispy loaf of cinnamon-like spiced squash bread, and, of course, apricots that that had been dried, and then stewed. The beverage was a strong and unsweetened hot tea.

After eating, and more than a quint before seventh glass, wearing his best remaining uniform and jacket, Quaeryt strolled in the still-chill early winter air toward the buildings that quartered the Pharsi battalion.

Before long, he saw an officer, who stopped in his tracks, turned, and then stiffened.

"Sir? Might I help you," asked the captain in accented Bovarian.

"I was looking for Major Arion…"

"I think he's still in the mess, sir. I'll see, sir."

"Thank you, Stensted."

The Pharsi captain looked surprised at the use of his name, but nodded and hurried off.

In moments, Arion was walking swiftly toward Quaeryt, who waited.

"Sir, you were looking for me?"

"I was, Major. I've been thinking, and I had a question. You'd mentioned the Eleni, and last night Subcommander Calkoran mentioned the *Eherelani.* Are they the same or different, and what might be the differences?"

Arion smiled. "*They* believe that they're different. The *Eherelani* are the elder wise women who are councilors or who have been councilors. Many are said to have the sight. They are few, but they all come from towns or cities or from near such. The Eleni are what … you might call them the *Eherelani* of the barrens or the wild places. Some of the *Eherelani* talk with the Eleni, but most do not. Some of the Eleni are said to be very powerful." He shrugged. "So are some of the *Eherelani.* I do not know what else to say because that is what I know, and I come from the cities of the north, not from the wilds … or from the south."

"Would any of your men and officers know?"

"I know of none who come from the south. Those who live here … most keep to themselves and fewer joined the forces fighting Kharst's armsmen. Those who did and survived returned to the wilds. Most of those who served under you, sir, come from the north and the port cities on the coast."

"There's something else I noticed. There are few pictures, sculptures, or carvings of people here, and none show their faces."

Arion smiled crookedly. "That is the way of the south. It has always been like that. I cannot say why."

"Why not?"

"Because the southerners will not talk of it, except to say that images of people give power to those who control the images."

Images or imagers? They have always worried about the power of imagers? Quaeryt nodded. That made a kind of sense.

"Subcommander Calkoran left earlier to see when the High Council will see you and Lady Vaelora. I would expect him back in a quint or so."

"I'll be meeting with my officers, and then I'll be in the main house."

"Yes, sir. I'll let him know."

"Thank you." Quaeryt nodded and turned toward the buildings to the north, conscious of the unevenness of his steps as his boots struck the stone paving of the courtyard in behind the entry and in front of the main dwelling.

One of the rankers must have alerted Zhelan, because the major met Quaeryt even before he had reached the first door to the rear building.

"Good morning, Commander."

"Good morning. Have you noticed anything, Major?"

"No, sir … except that we're likely the only ones here, us and the Pharsi battalion, that is. Stables haven't been used in a while. There's cut grass for fodder, but it's a wild grass. I'd be guessing the subcommander's men have been cutting it."

"Is it all right for the horses?"

"It looks to be the same as what they've grazed along the way, except it's healthier, longer stalks…"

"Is there any grain?"

"Some. Not so much as I'd like, but there's also some heavier grass, set in different lofts. Most likely winter feed."

"How are the quarters?"

"They're dry and solid. They're also clean. Enough space and more to spare."

"Have you seen any sculptures, pictures, or carvings that show people's faces?"

"Sir?"

"It sounds like a strange question. Trust me; it's not."

Zhelan frowned. "Now that you mention it, sir, there's no decoration at all in the barracks here. Just bunks and straw pallets, benches and tables. That's it." He paused. "The buildings here are bigger than they look. You could put a battalion in just this one, and the men wouldn't be cramped."

Barracks to hold a regiment dating back who knows how long? "How are things going?"

"Fine, sir."

"The undercaptains?"

"Undercaptain Baelthm's kept them in line, not that they've tried to stray. Khalis and Lhandor have been looking at everything, though."

"I asked them to … and to listen as much as they could."

"Begging your pardon, sir…"

"I'm trying to figure how to get the Pharsi High Council to agree to Lord Bhayar's terms … or to come up with terms he can accept. We really don't want to fight another war here." *Especially after what you're seeing.* "But if we can't get an agreement, sooner or later,

Bhayar will insist on having Khel."

"Rather not be in your boots, sir."

At the moment Quaeryt wasn't exactly pleased to be in them, either.

After spending another half quint talking to Zhelan, and then arranging for his and Vaelora's mounts to be readied, Quaeryt returned to the main dwelling, where he stood, and occasionally paced, until Calkoran finally rode through the gates less than two quints before eighth glass. The subcommander caught sight of Quaeryt and rode straight to the dwelling, where he reined up, immediately dismounted, tied his horse to one of the hitching rings, and stepped up onto the narrow porch.

"What did you find out?"

"Councilor Khaliost told me that the High Council would meet with you and Lady Vaelora, at your convenience, between eighth glass and ninth glass."

"When should we show up, then? What does it mean if we're earlier or later?"

"I could not say, sir. This is the south."

Don't any of them know anything about the south of their own land? Quaeryt wanted to snort, but only said, "We'll leave at eighth glass, then, and split the difference."

"Yes, sir."

The moment Calkoran rode off, Vaelora appeared, wearing a striking riding outfit of black trimmed with gray. She smiled. "I take it that we should be departing?"

"Our mounts should be here shortly."

"Do you have your credentials, such as they are?"

Quaeryt held up the leather folder he had carried across Lydar. "In here." While they waited, he told her what else he had learned.

When he finished, she looked at him. "Do you think that the southerners have taken over Khel? Calkoran never did get very far north."

"Or they want us to think they have."

"How can we tell?"

"We'll just have to do the best we can and see. We can also suggest that possibility, if indirectly, and see how they react." Quaeryt turned as two rankers led their mounts toward them. Toward the north end of the paved area, Quaeryt could see first company forming up.

The ride back to Saendeol and then to the gray stone bridge took about a quint. As they rode through the town, Quaeryt could see no pictures of people and no statues at all. In fact, he realized, none of the few signboards depicted any animals, either.

The bridge itself consisted of two stone spans, joined in the center at wide pier. The river itself was comparatively narrow, no more than fifteen yards wide, if several yards deep, its waters a deep gray-blue.

"What river is this?" Quaeryt asked Calkoran, who rode behind two outriders and just ahead of Quaeryt and Vaelora.

"The Vohan," replied the subcommander. "It flows into the Neimara north of Pointe Neiman."

As they crossed the bridge, Quaeryt studied it closely, but saw no decorations, nothing besides solid stone construction-and no marks on the stone. *Just like the buildings in Nordeau.* From the bridge they rode another half mille or so until the avenue joined the stone road that circled the hill on which the council building stood. From there they took the stone lane that gradually angled up the hill so that by the time they reached the top they were at the back of the structure, a circular building no more than thirty yards across.

From what Quaeryt had seen, there were four sets of double doors, positioned on the east, north, west, and south. Two men wearing tan trousers and jackets with brown boots and belts stood by the western doors. One of them spoke to Calkoran in Pharsi.

"You may enter by any doors but these," the subcommander relayed.

"Then we'll use the north doors," said Quaeryt, dismounting, and then offering a hand to Vaelora as she dismounted.

"The north doors would be good," said Calkoran. "Not all should come."

"No." Quaeryt turned to Zhelan and the imager undercaptains behind him. "If anything should happen … unfortunate … you are to destroy this building and everyone who does not wear a Telaryn uniform."

"Yes, sir!"

One of the Pharsi guards swallowed, suggesting he understood something of what had transpired.

Quaeryt made certain he held shields around Vaelora as they followed the circular stone walk around the side of the building to the brassbound honey-wood double doors on the north, where two more Khellan guards stood. As the three approached, each guard opened a door.

Quaeryt let Vaelora lead the way into the building if but by a half step, with Calkoran bringing up the rear.

Inside was like a stone and wooden tent, with huge long beams running from the gray stone walls to a solid circular stone pillar in the middle of the building. Narrow stone-framed windows, each a half yard wide and a yard apart, were spaced equally between the northern and southern doors on the east side of the structure. On the west side,

the window ran but for half the distance. A low stone platform a half yard high extended from the northwest midpoint of the wall due south to the southwest midpoint. Centered in the middle of the platform roughly two yards back was a wooden fronted counter or desk about five yards long. Seated behind that desk were four women and a man, all in tan, with red scarves similar in shape and drape to those used by choristers of the Nameless. The man sat at the south end, but he was the one to speak.

"You may approach the High Council."

"Councilor Khaliost," murmured Calkoran from behind Quaeryt.

Quaeryt eased out the leather folder, then slipped the parchment documents from it, and nodded to Vaelora, letting her precede him just slightly, as before, toward the wide stone step in the middle of the platform, but gesturing for Calkoran to accompany them. When they reached the space before the desk, Quaeryt eased both documents onto the flat honey-wood surface, then stepped back, waiting as the documents were passed from councilor to councilor and then back to the white-haired and weathered-looking woman in the center.

The central councilor took a last look at the documents and then looked to Vaelora. "Why should we even consider treating with you?"

"Because," Vaelora replied politely, "it is in your interest to do so."

"Our interest is in being free. Agreeing to any terms with Lord Bhayar will lessen that freedom."

"You need more trade, and you need more people," said Vaelora. "Lord Bhayar will have little interest in allowing either."

"How will he stop it?"

"He will not. He will merely tariff your traders heavily for any trade with Bovaria and Telaryn, and he is not likely to restrain his traders in their dealings with your people."

The head councilor turned to Quaeryt. "You have not spoken, Commander. What have you to add?"

"I would observe that Lord Bhayar wishes to see all of Lydar under one rule so that the fighting and the wars of the past will be no more. I would also observe that because he has not completed his efforts in Bovaria, Khel is currently in a position to gain many concessions and rights that may not be possible if it insists on refusing Lord Bhayar's offers."

"May not be possible?"

"Lord Bhayar is not always patient. Those descended from the Yaran warlords are known to keep their word, for good and for worse. He would prefer not to fight in Khel, but fight he will when the time comes. You thought you suffered greatly from Rex Kharst, but Rex Kharst lost over fifty regiments to the very last man in fighting Lord

Bhayar. Bhayar lost perhaps five. He does not wish to invade Khel. You do not wish him to. Those are conditions favorable to seeking an agreement."

"You are said to be the most deadly fighter and commander possessed by Lord Bhayar. You are also said to be a hand of Erion. Yet any man with white hair and a bad leg can claim to be a hand of Erion. Being white-haired and young, and even an imager, does not make that so."

"I have never claimed to be anything of Erion," Quaeryt replied. "Since we are talking of claims, neither does claiming you are a High Council with dominion over all Khel make it so."

"You doubt that? Then why are you here?"

Quaeryt smiled politely. "Because you have claimed that, and one has to start somewhere."

"If you doubt this, ask the Pharsi officer with you who I am."

Quaeryt looked to Calkoran, who was plainly shaken to be noticed.

"She is Councilor Cheliendra. She was … she is the head councilor of Eshtora," said Calkoran quietly. "The one on the end, the oldest man … as I said, he is Khaliost, and he was the head councilor from Ouestan. The woman beside him is, I think, from Ackyra."

If they don't represent Khel, it's an impressive bluff. "How do you know them all?" asked Quaeryt in a low voice.

"They gave me my final orders before the battle of Khelgror," murmured Calkoran dryly.

Quaeryt had suspected, but not known, that Calkoran had held much higher rank in Khel, but his reply suggested he'd been the equivalent of a marshal or submarshal. *And he never said that? Except what good would it have done, except to sound plaintive? And then for them to almost disregard him?* No wonder Calkoran had been angry! "Thank you for clarifying that, Marshal," he replied, inclining his head and keeping his voice low.

Then he turned back to face Head Councilor Cheliendra. "I am somewhat puzzled by another matter. Marshal Calkoran fought against the Bovarians at Khelgror, and he fought against them more successfully at Variana. Yet you seem dismissive of him."

"He and his troops vanished for years. Because they were not here, many suffered. Only because he returned under the protection of Lord Bhayar is he even alive. We would not wish to be seen as excessively … arbitrary."

"Why then," asked Vaelora, almost sweetly, "are you taking a position that will arbitrarily place you and Khel in greater danger and privation? Lord Bhayar is willing to go to great lengths to accommodate your needs."

"Is he?"

"Would he send his sister and one of his best commanders were he not?" countered Vaelora. "You cannot threaten him at present or in the future."

"Then why does he insist on governing Khel … if we present no threat?"

"You do present a threat," said Quaeryt, almost wearily. "You present the threat of weakness. Very great weakness. More Bovarian factors, as well as opportunists of every type, will soon descend on Khel, and you will be hard-pressed to deal with them. They will have more resources than remain to you, and they will attempt to steal or swindle everything that they can because they will see no force strong enough to stop them. In the end, you will either end up killing them or having your people killed by them. And, in the end, Lord Bhayar will end up invading Khel to keep that disorder from spreading to his lands. It would appear that you have lost too many young men and young women and that perhaps as few as four in ten people remain from those who lived in Khel before the time of the Red Death. With so few young people, times will become harder and not easier."

"And Lord Bhayar would make it so much easier by flooding our lands with outlanders?" The scorn in Cheliendra's voice was withering.

"No … your land will have many coming here. You cannot stop this. Neither can Lord Bhayar. He can use his power to enforce those laws that your High Council and he agree upon. He can open his lands to your traders without passage tariffs, so that they and you may profit."

"You do not show us the most attractive picture of the future, Commander."

"We are not here to deceive you. We are here to try to create the best possible course for both lands in a time of trouble."

Cheliendra's eyes fixed on Vaelora again. "Did your brother pick you merely because you are his sister and a woman?"

"My brother uses all tools necessary," replied Vaelora. "He never has been known to pick weak tools."

Cheliendra offered a hard smile, then turned to Quaeryt. "Commander … you rode into Saendeol with a company of men. What would it take to stop you from leaving?"

Quaeryt smiled back. "No man is the best judge of his own capabilities. I suggest you ask Marshal Calkoran … or any of the Pharsi officers who have served under me."

"Your reply is either of confidence or arrogance." The head councilor focused on the marshal, her voice cool, just short of mocking. "Calkoran, what would it take to stop the commander from

leaving?"

Calkoran replied levelly. "I do not believe there is any power in Khel that could stop the commander."

"Even from you … that is a remarkable statement." Cheliendra paused. "Are you willing to consider a wager, Commander?"

"That would depend on the wager."

"Very well. We will not even make it a wager. If … if you and your lady … will walk to the top of the Hall of the Heavens by yourselves and present yourself to the Eleni who holds it, then we will consider talking further with you. If you do not wish to do so, you are welcome to leave Saendeol and Khel as you wish."

"Where is the Hall of the Heavens?" asked Quaeryt, thinking that it might well be more than a thousand milles to the north in Montaignes D'Glace.

Cheliendra laughed roughly, not quite cackling. "There is no trickery. This hall is not located on Artiema or Erion or in the far north. It is less than a half day's ride to the west. Nor will there be any legions of armsmen or raiders or the like. Just you two, the Hall of Heavens, and the keeper of the Eleni and her handful of guardians. You may take what men your require to the base of the Hall, but no farther."

"Might I ask the purpose of this condition?"

"You asked proof of who and what we are. We ask proof of who and what you are, for it is clear that what you two are will determine to what degree we can trust Lord Bhayar. Or if we can trust him at all."

After traveling all this distance, with the fate of two lands at stake … they want a personal trial of some sort-just to keep talking? Quaeryt wanted to shake his head. The brief thought of just image-killing the entire High Council crossed his mind, but he dismissed it. The Pharsi would just form another High Council and refuse any overtures at all, and there would definitely be war and death and chaos.

Quaeryt smiled politely and nodded. "As you wish."

"A guide will meet you at the compound at seventh glass tomorrow morning. You may go."

Vaelora cleared her throat. "No. We choose to go. Just as we choose, out of care and courtesy, to undertake your request. While we are gone, think very carefully upon what you will say when we return. Think very carefully."

Quaeryt could sense *something* that accompanied her words, and every single face on the Council froze for an instant, even that of Cheliendra.

Then Vaelora inclined her head, barely, and turned. Quaeryt and Calkoran followed her out from the council building. Quaeryt was

more than glad that she had offered the final words. He wasn't certain he could have been so politely menacing.

As they walked back from the north doors to their mounts, Quaeryt looked to the marshal. "What can you tell me about the Hall of the Heavens?"

Calkoran shook his head. "I know little of it. It is said to be the place where Erion faced the thunderbolts of the Heavens to claim the daughter of the moon as his bride. That is the old legend. I have never been there. I do not know any who have. I have heard that few return, and all who do return come back changed."

Namer-frigged Pharsi … stiff-necked idiots, when we're trying to save their land and their way of life!

"All will be changed when we return," said Vaelora quietly and firmly. "All."

With that, Quaeryt could certainly agree.

38

Neither Quaeryt nor Vaelora said anything as they rode down from the council building under a sky that held a haze more like autumn than winter, although the wind was definitely on the chill side. Once they were on the avenue toward the bridge, Quaeryt directed Zhelan to take a detour through all the main streets of Saendeol, beginning with the square on the east side of the river and weaving back and forth.

"Is this so that the locals can see us?" murmured Vaelora.

"One reason. I also want to see their reaction." *And whether there are any statues of paintings of people anywhere around.*

After crossing the bridge, first company rode through the main square, immediately adjacent to the east side of the bridge, with half the square to the north of the avenue and the other half to the south. There, the few handfuls of local inhabitants frequenting the carts and vendors, of which there were less than a score, were largely gray-haired and older and looked at the Telaryn riders almost incuriously, although a few children were far more interested, but only when the adults around weren't looking at them.

Once they had ridden through both sides of the square, Zhelan led the company north on the street closest to the Vohan River, only so far as the shops extended, then south on the street east of the first. The tour of the shop areas of Saendeol took little more than a glass before they were headed north out of the small city. Quaeryt still saw no depictions of humans in any form, and while he overheard occasional comments, all were in Pharsi. He hoped that Lhandor and Khalis were listening and could remember most of what they overheard.

As they rode through the stone pillars to the compound, Quaeryt turned in the saddle. "You're looking pale. You need something to eat and drink. Go inside. I'm going to talk to Zhelan and the undercaptains. Then I'll be back and join you."

"Take whatever time you need."

"It shouldn't be that long."

Quaeryt and Vaelora eased away from the company and reined up before the main dwelling, where she dismounted and handed her mount's reins to him. Quaeryt watched until she was inside, then led her mare back toward the stables.

Once he'd dismounted and unsaddled the black gelding, he summoned the two Pharsi undercaptains, and the three of them walked ten yards from the stable doors before he stopped.

"Did either of you hear or see anything out of the usual?"

"One man said something about all of us being gone in a month,"

offered Lhandor.

"Another argued with him," added Khalis. "I didn't hear it all, but it was about the fact that Bhayar was part Pharsi and he had a Pharsi commander, and that meant trouble."

"Anything else?"

"A lot of muttering about our riding around." Khalis laughed.

"… one fellow said you could tell there weren't many real Pharsi in the company, because they didn't ride that well." Lhandor looked sheepish. "So I told him there were more than he thought."

"Did he say anything to that?" asked Quaeryt.

"Something about outland Pharsi not counting."

"That figures. Did you reply to that?"

"I couldn't, sir. We'd already ridden too far past him."

"That was probably for the best," Quaeryt said wryly. "Did either of you see any statues or paintings of people?"

Both undercaptains shook their heads.

By the time Quaeryt finished with the two, Zhelan was waiting by the stable door, trying to conceal a certain irritation, Quaeryt suspected.

"I'm sorry, Major. Lhandor and Khalis are the only officers I have who speak fluent Pharsi, and I wanted to hear if they'd overheard anything before they had a chance to forget."

Zhelan's face relaxed. "Worried they'd done something wrong."

"No. Now … things are going to get strange tomorrow." Quaeryt went on to explain what the High Council had requested.

"They want you two to do that just to keep talking?"

"I'd prefer that to fighting another war."

"Still … doesn't seem right, sir. Especially for Lady Vaelora."

"She issued her own challenge to their High Council. So we're both in this together. The head councilor said we could take as many troopers as we wished, but I think we'd make a better impression with only two squads, and the undercaptains. Like it or not, this is going to be about impressions as much as numbers. Which squads would you recommend?"

"Right now, sir, second and fourth squads."

"Then second and fourth squads it is."

After going over the remainder of arrangements for Solayi with Zhelan, Quaeryt walked back to the main dwelling, where Vaelora was waiting in the parlor for him.

"There's a drink for you on the table."

Quaeryt looked at the crystal beaker, filled with a pale orange liquid. "What is it?"

"It's not bad. Try it."

While he wasn't sure about anything that shade of orange,

Quaeryt settled into the armchair across from Vaelora and gingerly picked up the beaker, taking a small sip. As Vaelora had said, it wasn't bad, although the closest description Quaeryt could come up with was that the beverage was a cross between brandy and apricot beer. After another sip, Quaeryt looked to Vaelora. "You're still a little tired, aren't you?"

She nodded, setting the pale orange drink on a small table beside her.

"I thought you might be after what you did. I've been meaning to ask you…"

"Ask me what?"

"What you did before the Council."

"At the end? I don't know. Not exactly. Except it was almost like farsight … where I could see the dead and dying everywhere, all because those stupid old women couldn't see what was going to happen…"

"But they saw it, too."

"You didn't, did you?"

"No … but I felt it," he admitted.

"Good. I'm glad you didn't see what I saw." She shivered. "It was horrible."

"I've seen worse," he said quietly. "I've caused worse, I suspect. Or things equally bad."

"I know you have. That's why you didn't need to see it."

Quaeryt closed his mouth. He hadn't thought of it in that way.

"You have enough to worry about," Vaelora said. "We have to find a way to get the High Council to agree to some sort of terms."

"They don't seem terribly inclined to want to talk, at least not until we face whatever sort of trial they have in mind."

"The Eleni … is she some sort of imager?"

"She may be … or she may be able to project visions, the way you did. Or something else entirely."

"They can't be that powerful … or Kharst couldn't have conquered Khel."

"I'm beginning to think he didn't-just the larger towns and cities and the ports. That's why we need to work out something with them. Bhayar doesn't need to be in that situation."

"Neither do we," replied Vaelora.

"Except we already are."

"You'll figure out a way."

"We will," he affirmed. *Even if you don't have the faintest idea how you're going to do it, let alone whether the High Council is willing to be reasonable.* The Pharsi weren't always known for that. Certainly, many wouldn't have thought what Quaeryt had in mind for all the imagers

of Lydar was at all reasonable.

He smiled and tried another sip from the beaker.

39

For all their speculations on Samedi evening and after they woke on Solayi morning, Quaeryt and Vaelora still had no real idea what might face them in or on the so-called Hall of the Heavens. They dressed, Quaeryt in uniform and Vaelora in riding clothes, ate, and then repaired to the front study until Quaeryt rose to ready their mounts.

"I could-" began Vaelora.

"Not without compromising your status. Besides, you're getting to the point that you need to be a bit more careful. We'll be riding most of the day, remember."

Vaelora made a face, and Quaeryt shook his head in return.

He returned in little more than a quint with both mounts, while Zhelan was forming up second and fourth squads. Shortly, they mounted and rode toward the formation. They had only moved into place, at the head of the column when a rider, presumably their guide, rode through the stone pillars of the compound and then reined up at the front of the column.

The slim and wiry white-haired woman in dark leathers looked at Vaelora, then at Quaeryt. She smiled, then said something.

From where he sat on his mount behind Vaelora Calkoran said quietly, "She says that it's likely to be quite a day."

"Tell her we hope it will be beneficial for both Telaryn and Khel," returned Quaeryt.

The guide's response, according to Calkoran, was, "One way or another, the skies will decide."

The guide gestured and turned her mount.

"Forward!" ordered Quaeryt.

"Forward! On the guide!" echoed Zhelan, and all the Telaryn riders began to move, with the scouts falling in directly behind the guide, followed by Quaeryt and Vaelora, Calkoran and Zhelan, the undercaptains, and then the two squads.

For the first quint, they simply retraced the path back to the hill that held the council building, but rather than taking the lane up to the building, the Pharsi guide led them along the avenue around the hill to a narrow stone road little wider than a lane that headed due west toward the higher hills. That lanelike road was paved, not with the gray stone, but with a pinkish stone that looked every bit as durable as the ancient gray stone. Quaeryt saw no wear marks or gouges, and from its appearance the stone itself could have been cut and laid within the last year, though the worn and gentled appearance of the shoulders of the road gave the lie to that.

The lane continued due west, running through apricot orchards, where the branches of the trees had been trimmed back to just short of the graveled shoulder, itself only about half a yard wide. That explained to Quaeryt, at least partly, why he hadn't noticed a straight road running due west from Saendeol, since it would have looked like a space between trees.

He couldn't help but smile at that. *Hidden in plain sight.* That raised the question of what else might be so hidden.

He turned slightly in the saddle and looked back to Calkoran. "It appears we'll be on this road for a time, and there are a few things that could use more explanation."

"You wish to know why we left Khel?" asked the former marshal.

"It might help us to understand."

"I had three regiments left after Khelgror. We fell back to the road from south Ouestan. The Bovarians brought five regiments from the coast and at least ten from Khelgror. They surrounded us. We fought. We killed almost half the Bovarians, more than eight regiments worth. It was not enough. When all was over, there were less than three battalions of Khellan troopers remaining. Those are what we took to the northern mountains."

"If that was what happened, why don't they understand?"

"Because," said Calkoran slowly, "the High Council had ordered me to disband my men and to have them go to the hills in the dead of winter and fight in small groups. We had few supplies, no golds. I was withdrawing from Khelgror and trying to get the men south and closer to the coast, where they would have a better chance to survive. I did not know that the Bovarians had used Antiagon Fire to level most of Ouestan and left that city to march toward Khel. But they moved more quickly than I had thought, and we had no choice but to fight." Calkoran sighed. "In the eyes of the Council I had disobeyed. In the eyes of the Bovarians, we were to be hunted down and destroyed for the toll we had taken." He shrugged. "We decided to cross the northern lands in winter. It took much longer than that, and many died. We did not think we would survive to see Khel again, but we decided that we should die in battle against the Bovarians."

Now what do you do or say, for the sake of the Nameless? "Knowing this … you accepted a mission back to Khel?"

Calkoran straightened in the saddle. "You risked everything and saved Khel from the Bovarians. You did it many times. You did it when you could not image, when any musket ball or shaft would have struck you dead. How could I refuse? After I had failed once, already?"

Quaeryt shook his head. So did Vaelora, if almost imperceptibly.

After they had ridden at least two milles through the bare-leafed

apricot orchards, at the western edge of the valley, the road swung to the north, circling around a hill into another dryish valley filled with scattered pines and junipers that angled northwest. The road rose slightly over the next mille or so, then leveled out. With little warning, just as their guide passed a grove of junipers, she raised her arm and reined up. On the right was an open area, with a low stone wall encircling a fountain that spilled down a stone trough into a circular pool.

"She says that this is the last water," relayed Calkoran.

"Then we should water men and mounts," said Quaeryt. "Major, if you would."

"Water by squads! Second squad."

Vaelora immediately dismounted, as did Quaeryt, happy to stretch his legs. Calkoran followed.

Vaelora turned to face the former marshal. "You haven't been here before?"

"Lady, I did not even know that there was a southern council building. Until yesterday, I did not know that the Hall of the Heavens was near here."

"You had heard of it?" asked Quaeryt.

"Most in Khel have heard of it. It is where the *Eherelani* and Eleni are tested, and I knew it was somewhere in the south. There are tales that there was once another Hall in the north, but that it has been lost."

"How are they tested?" asked Vaelora.

Calkoran shook his head. "That is a secret they keep to themselves. I know only that often those who would be *Eherelani* are never heard from again."

"Hard-kept secrets," said Quaeryt.

"If you return, I would not be surprised if you would be the first outlanders to walk the Hall of the Heavens and survive."

"Probably because they haven't let any others try," said Quaeryt.

"They don't have much choice with you," added Vaelora. "They need proof that you are what everyone claims before they dare even consider any serious talks about the future of Khel."

"Proof of what we're claimed to be," corrected Quaeryt.

Vaelora offered a faint smile in return.

Calkoran looked away, nervously moistening his lips.

Once all the mounts had been watered, the guide resumed leading Quaeryt and Vaelora and their squads up the valley. With each mille that passed, the valley walls grew higher, and the valley itself narrower until it was more canyon than valley. Roughly a glass and a half later, the road turned north again, up an even narrower way with the paved road only wide enough for a single mount or possibly a

small cart drawn by a single draft animal. Quaeryt rode in front of Vaelora, his shields extended slightly to cover them both.

Less than two-fifths of a mille later, the road ended in a circular space at the base of a cliff that rose to the northwest. Quaeryt judged that the cliff was not that tall, perhaps twenty or thirty yards, but an expanse of the hard, pink, granite-like stone some hundred yards wide had been smoothed and polished into a mirror-like finish. In the center of that expanse was a set of stone steps, also of the hard pink stone, that had been chiseled out of-or imaged into-the sheer cliff.

When he looked up the steps, Quaeryt could see nothing but sky.

The guide called out something.

"If you choose," said Calkoran, "you are to walk to the top and meet what awaits you."

Who knows what lies at the top of those steps? He turned to Vaelora. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

They dismounted, then walked toward the guide in dark leathers, who had also dismounted and now stood near the base of the steps, which followed an angled cut up through the stone of the cliff.

Quaeryt looked at the guide, then inclined his head. She nodded.

Vaelora looked at the guide. The guide's eyes widened, and she stepped back, as if involuntarily.

"Let us begin, dearest," said Vaelora quietly.

Quaeryt did not ask what she had done, although whatever it had been had clearly terrified the guide.

The steps were neither narrow nor wide, but they could walk up side by side, although there were no handrails and the treads were cut less than calf-depth into the angled passageway up toward what was presumably the Hall of the Heavens.

Halfway up, Quaeryt squeezed Vaelora's arm. "Stop for a moment. You're breathing too hard."

"So are you."

"Why do you think I told you to stop?" He offered a grin, one that faded. "I can sense … something … but I can't tell what." He felt almost stupid saying that he could feel something, yet it was that way with imaging. So why was this different?

"There's someone up there, and they have … power."

Quaeryt glanced back, and wished he hadn't. While they weren't terribly high, perhaps fifteen yards, it was clear enough that if they made any serious misstep, they'd tumble all the way down-and even with shields around them, they'd break more than a few bones, and that was if they were fortunate.

Could he anchor the shields to the stone?

Surprisingly … he couldn't. Was that because the stone was so

polished that there was no way to anchor anything? *Someone planned this to be able to deal with shields … at least to some degree.* That worried him, more than a little.

"Quaeryt?"

"Just a moment. I need to think."

Could he anchor shields to the entire top edge of where the stone cut holding the steps emerged, spreading them far enough to provide enough support that something couldn't push them down the steps? There was nothing else to do but try.

He concentrated.

After several moments he had the feeling that the expanse of anchoring or attempted anchoring would provide protection against moderate force-such as small boulders, arrows, and crossbow bolts … and perhaps a musket, but not against much more. Still, that was better than nothing.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I was about to ask you. What was that all about?"

"Later. I'll tell you later."

As they neared the top of the steps, Quaeryt could still see nothing but the sides of the angled passage that held the stone staircase … and the sky, as if they were indeed walking upward into a hall that held the heavens alone. Then, as his eyes reached the point where he could look above the sides of the stone staircase, he took a deep breath. The steps ended almost in the middle of a polished flat stone surface whose edge appeared to be an oval, cut off at the end behind them by the flat cliff through which they had climbed.

At that moment a gust of wind howled from nowhere, pressing them backward.

Quaeryt linked them to the shields, because, as he'd discovered more than a year earlier, shields by themselves provided no protection against wind. Even so, the wind ripped at their jackets and trousers.

He slowly surveyed the polished surface of what had likely once been a rocky hilltop, but saw no one and nothing. *The Eleni must have concealment shields … or something like them.* Just to see what might happen, Quaeryt wrapped a concealment around himself and Vaelora.

As suddenly as it had come up, the wind died down to nothing.

After several moments Quaeryt let the concealment vanish.

A huge wheel, some three yards high and two wide, appeared from nowhere, only yards away, rolling toward Quaeryt and Vaelora.

Quaeryt concentrated, then imaged it away.

Instantly a chill wind swirled ice flakes around them. As the wind died, it dispersed the light fog that had momentarily enfolded Quaeryt and Vaelora.

Before Quaeryt could consciously react, a crossbow bolt shattered

on his shields, the fragments dropping and skidding across the polished stone surface.

Then the entire surface before them was filled with bleeding bodies and moaning women.

Except Quaeryt could tell that he was only seeing an image. *How do you remove an image?*

Something radiated from Vaelora … and the image vanished.

A second image appeared, this one of hundreds of hard-faced, black-eyed women in dark leathers, each with a crossbow aimed at Quaeryt and Vaelora.

That image vanished as well, and as it did, something crashed into Quaeryt's shields from the side, with enough force that it shook his body, if for a moment. He glanced around, then winced as he saw the giant bird-a sun eagle-lying crumpled on the polished stone less than five yards away to his right.

He took a step toward it, and then another, hoping it was only stunned.

"Quaeryt!"

He glanced back, and then up, only to see two more of the sun eagles circling-not above him, but above Vaelora. The last thing he wanted to do was to kill another of the magnificent birds.

Abruptly he image-projected the sense of a mighty black eagle above the two eagles about to begin their dive toward Vaelora, with absolute cruelty of a pitiless predator, and the sense that Vaelora belonged to that predator. Then he added the compulsion that the pair should return to the Eleni who directed them, although he had yet to see her anywhere.

He watched intently … ready to image more, if necessary, but the two slowly circled down and away from Vaelora, slowly and gracefully coming to rest on the red leather shoulder pads of the Eleni woman who appeared, seemingly from nowhere, on the polished stone some thirty yards in front of Quaeryt.

Vaelora moved up beside Quaeryt. "I've never felt anything like that. I felt like the smallest of the small."

"I didn't want to kill the other eagles. They were just going to do as they were trained. Stay close to me. We're going over to see what this was all about." First, he moved forward to the crumpled form of the eagle, hoping against hope that it was only stunned, but as he knelt he could see that it was dead. Slowly, he straightened, then continued toward the Eleni in her dark leathers and red leather gloves and belt. The black-haired huntress was older than she had looked from a distance. She watched impassively as Quaeryt and Vaelora neared, still saying nothing when they halted a yard away.

Both sun eagles looked at him, their golden eyes cold.

He met those eyes and gazed back, image radiating the power of the heavens and wings broader than the skies. In moments, both birds looked away.

"They said you claimed to be a son of Erion." The Eleni's Bovarian was heavily accented.

"I claim nothing," replied Quaeryt. "I am who I am."

"You are Pharsi from the far east of Lydar." The huntress's eyes took in Vaelora. "So are you." She studied Quaeryt. "You have the hair of a lost one, and the limp." Her eyes took in his hands. "And the fingers of a son of Erion. Do you deny that?"

"I have never claimed to be other than I am. I was orphaned as a small child and raised by the scholars of Solis."

"And the woman?"

"She is the sister of Lord Bhayar of Telaryn, and she is of the blood of the Pharsi."

"Why did you kill Athyor?"

"The first eagle? Because I did not see him in time. He struck my shields before I could do anything." Mentioning shields was a slight risk, but the Eleni had to know about shields, and that he had such.

"You are protected even from what you cannot see?"

Quaeryt nodded.

The Eleni continued to study Quaeryt, her dark eyes fixed on him as if to use her gaze as a knife.

Quaeryt waited.

"You are doubly blessed, Son of Erion … and triply cursed. You are blessed with powers that none will dare best and blessed by the love of a woman. You are cursed because you can only use those powers for others, unless you would destroy yourself. You are cursed because to do what you must, others will be known for what you have made possible, and you are cursed to know that all this is so."

The dark-eyed Eleni looked long at Vaelora before speaking again. "You will be the greatest of your blood in this time or any other. None will recognize that, for you have wed the lost one and share his curse and heritage. Nor will any remember your names, even though your trials will be great and your deeds will change Lydar for all time."

Quaeryt could feel the sadness that radiated from her, and that surprised him. She pitied them? Still, he had a question. *But then, you always have had questions.* "I have noticed that there are no pictures or sculptures of people. Is this because the ancient ones attempted to image beyond what should be imaged? Or is there another reason?"

A faint smile crossed the lips of the Eleni before she spoke. "It came to pass in the old times that the ability to create things from where there is nothing was not accompanied by the wisdom to

understand what to create and how to create, and when not to create … and that doomed the folk of the old south. That is why all who image must face the Hall of the Heavens, or die, for only should those such as the Eleni or the *Eherelani* be trusted with such powers. As a hand of Erion and a farseer who have faced the Hall of the Heavens, you and the lady are like the Eleni and the *Eherelani.* You must also be respected."

"But not trusted?" asked Quaeryt, raising his eyebrows.

"You can be trusted to use your powers, but no Eleni or *Eherelani* would care to trust the outcome of the use of powers by a son of Erion. You are more than a hand of Erion, more than a lost one of legend. All may hope, but to trust is beyond reason."

"Sometimes," Quaeryt said gently, "the greatest of reason is to trust."

"If one has the wisdom to know whom to trust." She paused, but briefly. "Go as you will, for the Hall of the Heavens has judged you and found you worthy. And more." The last two words were added, in a lower voice, as if unwilled and reluctant.

"We thank you and wish you well, in keeping your heritage and ours," replied Vaelora.

After that, Quaeryt merely nodded.

When they turned and walked toward the stone staircase down from the Hall of the Heavens, Quaeryt could sense the eyes of the Eleni still upon them.

For all that the Eleni had said that he and Vaelora should be respected, Quaeryt maintained shields linked to the edge of the stone staircase until they were both standing firmly at the bottom of the steps.

The woman who had been their guide bowed, as if reluctantly, and murmured several sentences.

"You are like unto the *Eherelani,*" said Calkoran. "As with them, your every act will be weighed and measured, and none will wish you close, respected as you may be."

Not that such is any different from most of the last year-except now Vaelora's facing the same thing. But, really, was that any different for her, either?

Quaeryt could feel all the eyes on him and Vaelora, and the questions, none of which he wanted to answer. So, to break the stillness and forestall questions, he said, "We've done what the High Council asked. We're heading back. Mount up. We've got a ways to cover."

While he wanted to ask Vaelora a question, he wasn't about to until later and he could ask without everyone looking at them and hanging on every word. Later didn't come until they were on the

wider road, with a barely warm midafternoon sun at their backs. “What did you do up there … to break that illusion?”

Vaelora smiled, a trace shyly. “I just thought … a different version of those words.”

While Quaeryt thought he knew, he had to ask, “Which words?”

“I will not see what is not and may never be.”

“How…?”

She shrugged. “It seemed right. Just as I can tell between what I’d like to see and a true farsight.”

He nodded. *How many people can make that distinction?* Then he smiled.

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Quaeryt decided against asking for a meeting. Instead, he dispatched Calkoran and the guide with the message that since he and Vaelora had accommodated the High Council's request, they would meet with the High Council at eighth glass on Lundi morning. Surprisingly, he and Vaelora slept reasonably well on Solayi evening.

Lundi morning dawned cold but clear, with a wind out of the northeast. Usually, Quaeryt knew, that when the wind blew out of the center of Lydar, there was less likelihood of heavy rain or snow. *Usually … but not always.*

Immediately after a hurried breakfast, he went to find Zhelan, who was already inspecting the stables.

"Commander, you look to be in a hurry, sir. Begging your pardon, sir, but have you heard something from the Khellans?"

"Not yet. I don't know exactly how the High Council will react, but it could be that we may want to leave Saendeol immediately after Lady Vaelora and I meet with them. Just in case, I'd like to have the men ready for a departure. It might be as early as ninth glass, and it might not happen at all today."

Zhelan raised his eyebrows, wanting to ask a question, but not wanting to presume.

Quaeryt almost smiled, but replied, "The Pharsi are stubborn. Whatever happens, they're unlikely to accept Lord Bhayar's terms immediately. I could be wrong, but we're in no position to start an attack on Khel, especially at the beginning of winter, even if we are in the south."

"You're thinking of returning to Kherseilles, sir?"

"More likely to Geusyn or elsewhere in Bovaria while the Pharsi decide. If they do accept Lord Bhayar's terms, we won't stay much longer, nor will they wish us to, I suspect."

"Yes, sir."

"What are your thoughts, Major?" Quaeryt paused and added, "Your honest thoughts," emphasizing his desire for that honesty with a touch of image projection.

"I'd be agreeing with you, sir. There's little more we can do here."

"Except kill people … and that won't help our mission."

"No, sir."

"We'll need just a squad as an escort to the High Council, and Undercaptain Khalis and Undercaptain Horan. I'd think we should form up at two quints before the glass."

"Very good, sir."

Quaeryt returned to the main dwelling and sat in the front study

and fretted until Vaelora joined him.

"You think they'll say 'no'?" she asked.

"I don't think they'll commit to anything. If they reject Bhayar's terms, that immediately angers him. If they accept them, that will anger most Pharsi."

"So what do we do?"

"Make certain, as best we can, that they commit to eventually accepting them without saying so."

"That won't please Bhayar."

"I'm sure it won't, but I can hope he'll be a realist."

"He'll blame you, you know?"

"I'm quite aware of that," he said dryly. "I can hope that, in the end, it will work out." *So long as getting to the end doesn't take too long … or put me in the far north of Bovaria destroying High Holders who can't or won't accept Bhayar.*

He was glad when it was time to leave for the meeting with the High Council, if only so that they could learn where they stood … and, hopefully, what they could do about it.

The ride from the compound was uneventful, and there were neither significantly more or significantly fewer people along the streets or in the main square of Saendeol, although Quaeryt did notice that many wore relatively heavy coats or sweaters, and even the poorest seemed to be wearing several layers of clothing.

"Is it that cold out?" he asked Vaelora.

"It's colder than it has been, but not by that much."

Quaeryt looked to the north, but the sky remained clear, if slightly hazy.

Abruptly Vaelora laughed softly.

"What?"

"We're in the south. They're not that used to cold. It was the same way when Father moved us from Extela to Solis. I kept wondering why people in Solis were wearing coats on pleasant days."

Quaeryt hadn't even considered that, possibly because he'd grown up in Solis, but had then had to get used to the bitter cold of Tilbor.

As before, when they reached the council building, Quaeryt and Vaelora walked around to the north doors, followed by Calkoran. Neither of the guards at the doors, even as they opened them, would look directly at Quaeryt or Vaelora.

Good or bad? Quaeryt almost shrugged. One way or another, it didn't matter.

He remained a half step behind Vaelora when they climbed the single step and stopped before the long desk and the five councilors.

Vaelora inclined her head so slightly that the motion was barely perceptible. "As you requested, we walked the Hall of the Heavens

and met with the Eleni. We have returned to request your consideration of the favorable terms offered by Lord Bhayar."

"For envoys who are requesting favorable action, you are not being especially accommodating," replied Cheliendra.

"You requested that we prove we could walk the Hall of the Heavens," said Vaelora. "We did. Our request, in turn, is that you consider the terms."

When there was no immediate response, Quaeryt spoke. "We came here to work out terms that would be beneficial to both Khel and Telaryn. Thus far, we have not demanded anything more than a meeting time. You on the other hand…" Quaeryt let the silence draw out. "Let us just say that for the leaders of a land facing terrible problems and the threat of worse, you appear to be behaving in a manner that does not consider realistically either the situation in which you find yourself or the benefits to be gained by working out terms with Lord Bhayar."

"You claim that we will benefit because we stand alone," said Cheliendra. "Yet Antiago is not yet a part of Telaryn. You say that you do not come to threaten. Yet is not your very presence a threat?"

Quaeryt did not reply immediately, thinking for several moments. "Is it a threat to come to a neighbor and to say there is a fire burning through the grasslands that will consume you? Is it a threat to warn of an oncoming storm? Once there were many separate lands in Lydar. Once even what is now Khel was three lands, I have heard it said, and this very city was the capital of Jovana. Those three lands did not survive, but became one. So it is becoming with Lydar. It will be one land before long. You in Khel did not regain your full freedom from Bovaria because you were strong. You regained it because Lord Bhayar destroyed Rex Kharst, and that was because he was strong, not you."

"You say that you will not use your powers, Son of Erion," asked the woman to the immediate right of Cheliendra, whose name Quaeryt did not recall, "to force Khel to agree to terms with Lord Bhayar. Then why are you here?"

"Khel cannot be forced to agree to those terms, not unless the land is laid waste and even more Pharsi are slaughtered, not unless all are frozen under the lash of a winter you have not ever seen, and should hope you will never see. Your choices are simple. You can agree to work out terms with Lord Bhayar. Or you can refuse for all time, and in time, you will see that winter and those deaths." Quaeryt knew that there was a third choice, but he wanted the High Council to suggest it.

"You have said that we stand alone, but there are others not yet a part of Telaryn," replied Cheliendra.

“The time when you will stand alone, and without allies or friends, is not that far in the future,” replied Vaelora, even before Quaeryt could have said a word. “Long before Rex Kharst attacked Telaryn and brought all this to bear, the Autarch of Antiago inflicted great pain upon Lord Bhayar. Even as we traveled here, we were attacked by Antiagon ships. After such provocations, how long will Antiago stand, do you think?”

“I imagine that depends on how much Antiagon Fire the Autarch has and how strong the walls of north Antiago are,” interjected the councilor to the right of Cheliendra.

She might have said more, Quaeryt thought, but for the sharp glance from the head councilor.

Cheliendra cleared her throat. “There is an old saying. ‘Do not argue over what is not and what may never be.’ That profits no one.” She looked directly at Vaelora. “Lady Vaelora, *Eherelani* and farseer that you are, we cannot decide for our people on what might be. If and when we stand alone, there will be time to consider the terms Lord Bhayar offered. Even then, it will take time for those terms to be sent to the councils across Khel. You should understand that Khel is not ruled by the will of the High Council, but that the High Council reflects the will of the people as expressed by the local councils.”

“That we do understand, Councilor,” returned Vaelora. “When you send those terms to the local councils, and as I stand here, you will have to do so or face even greater devastation of your land, we would suggest that it would be the better part of wisdom to suggest that some accommodation with Lord Bhayar would be greatly more to the benefit of Khel than failure to reach such accommodation.”

“And what accommodation is Lord Bhayar offering, if you might tell us.”

“Refraining from invading Khel and reducing it to an even greater state of ruin than the one in which it already finds itself,” replied Quaeryt. In the momentary silence that followed, he image-projected a sense of destruction and devastation, of death and despair, of famine and futility.

Even Cheliendra paled.

After another silence, she spoke. “There have been others who could impose images and feelings … but the most appalling aspect of those you have shown us is that they come from within you and from what you have experienced. How can you live within yourself, Son of Erion?”

With great difficulty, at times. Quaeryt looked at her, image-projecting absolute conviction. “Why do you think I am here? Why do you think I am almost pleading with you to accept Lord Bhayar’s terms? Do you think I wish more devastation?”

"Then leave us be," offered the woman who had not yet spoken.

Quaeryt smiled bitterly. "Then I would condemn the children of today's children to the continuation of war and devastation, and the same to their children. You wish a momentary peace, but given what men are, the only lasting peace within the boundaries of Lydar that can come is when all Lydar is one land under one set of laws. Lord Bhayar would make those laws fair for all, as he has done in Tilbor and as he is doing in Bovaria."

"And you would see to that?" The words were almost mocking.

"He has no choice." Vaelora's voice was like the chill of the deepest winter, immobilizing all on the High Council as if they had been turned into pillars of ice. "And Lord Bhayar has no choice but to heed him."

Quaeryt took a step backward … and waited. So did Vaelora.

Several low sentences passed back and forth between the three women at the center of the Council. Then Cheliendra straightened and looked at Quaeryt and Vaelora.

"The will of the High Council is to consider Lord Bhayar's terms once Khel stands alone. In the meantime, when you leave Saendeol and the lands of Khel, you are to take with you all those men who served Lord Bhayar. The one who stands behind you is never to return to Khel, even if in the future, we reach an accord with Lord Bhayar, for that will be a part of that accord. If such an accord is agreed to, all others may return as they wish. You may remain here in Saendeol for as long as a week, or as you wish."

"We will depart shortly," replied Quaeryt. "There is little reason to impose on your hospitality now that you have heard us out. We wish for all of us that we can reach a peaceful agreement."

"Until then," added Vaelora.

Then they turned and walked from the building.

Once more, on their way out, the two guards avoided looking at either of them.

Neither Quaeryt nor Vaelora said more than pleasantries until they returned to their quarters at the compound outside Saendeol and began to gather their gear for the ride back to Kherseilles.

"Poor Calkoran," said Vaelora sadly.

"You don't think they'll ever relent?" Quaeryt couldn't help but recall when Calkoran had ridden nearly headlong into a Bovarian musket ambush to warn Quaeryt because there had been no time and no other way to convey the warning. Nor could he ignore the totally dedicated support that Calkoran and the Pharsi troopers had provided. While he understood the High Council, he truly wondered how many of them had ever seen real combat.

"No. Do you? Didn't you notice that the High Council never

addressed him directly? Except one time. For them, he does not exist as a Pharsi."

"And he never will?"

"Bhayar will not jeopardize an accord over Calkoran, though he will find some other recompense."

Quaeryt noted the definite, if slight, emphasis on the word "will."

Her voice was soft as she went on. "There's always someone to blame."

"Like us … for failing to get the High Council to agree to Bhayar's terms?"

"Once Antiago falls, they will accept terms," said Vaelora.

"And Antiago will fall?"

"Why do you think Skarpa is in Geusyn? Do you think that Bhayar sent two full regiments with you just to treat with poor battered Khel?"

"That thought had crossed my mind, but I can't see Skarpa attacking Antiago without provocation."

"We were attacked by Antiagon ships coming here. Others may attack on our return. Aliaro has been unable not to act imprudently for any length of time."

"Is this another farsight? Like the one you won't tell me more about?"

"That one is … I just don't think I should tell you."

Quaeryt nodded. He understood her reasons, even if he didn't happen to be certain he agreed, but his views wouldn't change hers.

"This isn't a farsight." Vaelora laughed. "It's the result of years of quiet eavesdropping. And when Aliaro has been destroyed, the High Council will haggle. They will protest, but they will agree."

"Because they see they have no choice?" Quaeryt's tone was sardonic, yet resigned.

"No, dearest. They will accept because they have seen devastation in your eyes, and heard destruction in your voice … and felt the honest desperation of your not wishing to unleash it upon them."

And they heard icy certainty from a Pharsi farseer, which may have meant much more. But he did not say those words.

41

The ride back to Kherseilles took six long days, a day less than the trip to Saendeol had required, partly because Quaeryt and Vaelora had not wanted to remain in Khel any longer than necessary, and partly because Quaeryt had begun to worry even more about what was happening along the Bovarian border with Antiago.

Just after sunset on Solayi evening, first company reined up short of the harbor piers at Kherseilles. As Quaeryt had suspected, the four merchanters were long gone, and the *Montagne* and the *Solis* were tied up at opposite sides of the longest stone pier. He was about to ride out to the *Montagne* when a single rider approached.

In the growing twilight it took Quaeryt a moment after the man reined up to recognize Subcommander Khaern.

"Commander, sir. We weren't certain when you'd be back. We took the liberty of turning two of the warehouses-the ones that were not in terrible condition-into quarters. The inns here…" Khaern shook his head. "That will leave space on the *Montagne* for first company."

Quaeryt smiled. "I certainly don't have a problem with that, but I'll need to talk with Captain Nykaal and you. Matters aren't what we'd like, and Lady Vaelora and I need to hear what's happened here so that we can decide what to do next. In a half glass on the *Montagne*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh … and you and Subcommander Calkoran will need to work out quarters for his battalion after I spend a few moments with him."

Khaern nodded.

"Good." Quaeryt turned in the saddle. "Subcommander Calkoran … I'd like you to join us for the meeting on the *Montagne*. I'd also like a word with you before that … once we've unloaded."

"Yes, sir." Calkoran's voice remained slightly subdued, as it had been on the entire journey back from Saendeol.

Quaeryt, Vaelora, and first company then rode along the stone pier until they reached the *Montagne.* After dismounting and seeing that his and Vaelora's gear, and Vaelora, were safely aboard, Quaeryt returned to the pier to meet with Calkoran.

As he stood there and the Pharsi subcommander walked toward him in the light breeze off the water, surprisingly raw to Quaeryt, although in a sense it felt warmer than the inland winds, Quaeryt couldn't help but feel compassion for Calkoran, who had been punished far more for trying to do the right thing by his men than so many officers who'd actually done the wrong things and never been discovered. *One of the ironies of war and battle.*

"Sir?"

"How fast can your battalion make the journey from Kherseilles to Geusyn?"

"A good ten days, maybe more if the weather is bad."

"Are you willing to do that? We're going to need every man possible."

"Antiago?"

"Either Antiago or the southern High Holders, if not both."

"Sir … we've not spoken … about the future."

"No … we haven't. Are you willing to remain in service?"

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt understood what lay behind those words. *What other real choice does he have?* "In time, Lord Bhayar will be properly grateful. At the moment it's a good thing we're as far from Variana as we are."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Lord Bhayar would prefer others see what he would call reason. I believe that will happen. It just won't happen for a while, and it's better to let time and distance separate us while events make that point rather than have to explain it in person."

The faintest smile crossed Calkoran's face before fading away.

"I'll leave the arrangements to you, but I can likely spare a hundred golds from what Lord Bhayar provided to help with supplies and other necessities. I'd like you to leave as soon as possible after we depart. We'll talk about the timing after we meet with Nykaal and Khaern." Quaeryt paused. "One other thing. What about the mounts that the Council provided?"

Calkoran snorted. "We paid for them. The Council merely allowed us to purchase them."

"Then take them with you, regardless of the Council's decree. They might make the trip easier."

"If you had not suggested that, I would have," Calkoran paused. "Sir … there is one other matter. I would be remiss…"

"Go ahead."

"There have been other sons of Erion. There was Calixen, who was drowned in a flood, and Polysses, who fell from the sky and the road of Erion. They are among those we remember. Do you know why?" Calkoran's voice was soft, almost sad.

"No."

"Because they failed. They failed because they turned from their destiny and sought glory and power for themselves. We remember those who failed. No one remembers those who were true to their destiny and did not seek glory."

Quaeryt tried not to shiver at the honest certainty in the voice of the Khellan officer. Finally, he said, "Thank you."

"You should know."

Quaeryt nodded. "Until later, then." He watched as Calkoran rode back to the foot of the long stone pier.

It was close to seventh glass when Quaeryt, Vaelora, Nykaal, Khaern, and Calkoran gathered around the circular table in the captain's stateroom on the *Montagne*. Quaeryt stood, letting the others sit. He began by summarizing the events of their journey, then concluded, "We believe that, in time, the Khellan High Council will agree to some form of agreement. If they do, there is nothing to be gained by remaining in Kherseilles. If they do not, there is also no reason to remain here, since we do not have the resources to conduct or even begin a campaign, especially given the bitter winters in the north and west of Khel." He turned to the ship's captain. "Have you received any messages from anyone?"

"No, sir."

"Have you seen any Antiagon ships?"

"I've had the pinnaces patrolling. Wouldn't have wanted anyone to come in and catch us unaware. Two or three sails … might have been Antiagon. They didn't come close enough to the harbor to be sure."

"How many men can you and the *Solis* transport back to Ephra-or Geusyn?"

"On a single voyage?" asked Nykaal. "Might be able to handle seven hundred. Eight hundred would be pushing it."

"How soon could you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"We'll have to push it … twice." Quaeryt ignored the captain's frown. "We can't afford to make three trips to get first company and the regiment back to Geusyn, and Subcommander Calkoran barely has enough spare mounts for a company."

"It won't be comfortable, sir," said Nykaal.

"I understand, Captain. Believe me, I do. But I have reason to believe that Submarshal Skarpa may need as many additional regiments as possible as soon as practicable, and we will accomplish nothing by remaining here."

"As you wish, Commander."

Quaeryt could tell that Nykaal was less than pleased. "You have some concerns that you have not voiced, Captain? Is there something I should know?" Quaeryt image-projected both sincerity and concern.

"Nothing that I could put a finger on, sir." Nykaal paused. "Winds might not favor us."

"At this time of year? They're usually out of the southwest on the west of Lydar," said Quaeryt.

For just a moment, Nykaal looked surprised.

“Unless they’ve changed in the years since I was a quartermaster,” added Quaeryt.

Again … there was the slightest hesitation before the captain said, “You’re right. Most of the time they are, but in Ianus … you can’t always count on it.”

“We’ll have to chance that, and you will have imagers for protection on the first voyage.”

“That’d be true enough.” Nykaal smiled. “That’s a comfort. Is there anything else?”

“At what glass should we begin loading tomorrow?”

“You want an early departure. Say fourth glass.”

Quaeryt looked to Khaern. “I’ll need you to stay here and hold Kherseilles until the *Montagne* and *Solis* return. I’ve leave it to you as to which two battalions you want to embark.”

“Second and fourth, sir. They’ll be ready to load out at fourth glass. If you wouldn’t mind…”

“Go. You have a lot to handle.” Quaeryt smiled warmly at the subcommander.

Close to two glasses passed before Quaeryt finally finished dealing with Nykaal, giving last moment instructions to Calkoran, and going over loading plans with Nykaal and Bourlyt, the captain of the *Solis*. His eyes were twitching, and he was sore all over when he finally sat on the edge of the wide bunk of the captain’s cabin and pulled off his boots.

“Is everything settled?” asked Vaelora, gently in, as usual, high Bovarian.

“As much as it can be tonight.” He yawned. “It’s been a long day, and tomorrow will be early.” *Too early*. “Do you have any idea why Nykaal is worried?”

“I don’t think he wants to head back.”

“Why not?”

“It could be that it has nothing to do with him, but you.”

“Someone doesn’t want me back in Bovaria too soon?”

“That’s only a guess.”

“It can’t be Skarpa.”

“No … but it could be almost any other senior officer. Deucalon, Myskyl, or one of their commanders. Or … it could be that Nykaal has other reasons.”

“Or he’s worried about what the Antiagons might do when he returns to Ephra?” Quaeryt shook his head. “I’d doubt that.”

“We’ll just have to watch and see.”

As with everything else.

42

Quaeryt truly had to force himself out of the wide bunk in the darkness of early Mardi morning. He did try to move quietly in dressing, but suspected he woke Vaelora anyway, although she rolled over and was sleeping once more-he thought-when he left the stateroom. While he watched the onloading of the two battalions, for the most part, he let Khaern direct the operation, and by sixth glass, Nykaal and Bourlyt had ordered the gangways pulled.

As the lines were singled up, Vaelora joined Quaeryt on the upper sterncastle deck.

"You couldn't sleep?"

"With all that noise?" She raised her eyebrows.

It hadn't seemed that loud to Quaeryt, but he supposed he was more accustomed to it … or not so light a sleeper as Vaelora.

"Look!" said Vaelora. "Over there."

Quaeryt turned to follow her gesture. At the foot of the piers, Telaryn-uniformed riders were forming up. It had to be Calkoran's battalion presenting a departure honor guard. "I didn't order that."

"Of course not," replied Vaelora. "Calkoran wants to show his appreciation and respect for your standing behind him and his men. How else could he do it?"

Quaeryt had to agree with that. He also hoped that, somehow, he could reward the Pharsi troopers whose bravery, skill, and support had enabled the imagers to function and improve. Without them, even more of the imagers might well have perished in the campaign to take Bovaria. *Not that it's still totally taken.*

From behind them, Nykaal issued another set of orders, and the lines were reeled in, and the two seamen vaulted aboard as the *Montagne* slowly pulled away from the pier under partial sail. As the captain ordered more sail spread, the ship moved more quickly out of the harbor. Quaeryt looked back, but Calkoran's troopers maintained their position at the foot of the pier so long as Quaeryt could see them.

Quaeryt remained on deck, watching as the *Montagne* moved out into the Gulf and steadied on a southeast heading. He saw no other sails, but that didn't mean that the Antiagons might not send more vessels against the pair of Telaryn ships.

After a time Vaelora said quietly, "I'm getting chilled. Would you mind…?"

"Of course not. I'll see you later."

She reached out and squeezed his hand, then moved to the ladder.

Perhaps a quint later Quaeryt sensed Nykaal leaving his position by the helm and crossing the deck to join Quaeryt.

"Very clean departure," said Quaeryt.

"Your men loaded well. That made it easy."

"Khaern will be here when you return. There shouldn't be any problem then, either."

"You never said much about your time at sea," offered Nykaal almost jovially, even while clearly ignoring the implications of Quaeryt's words.

"It's not something I'm terribly proud of," replied Quaeryt. "I ran away from the scholars and spent more than three years on a merchanter. It took that long for me to realize what a mistake it was." He laughed. "That's not true. I realized it was a mistake in a few months. It took me the rest of the time to admit that I'd have to go back to Solis and grovel to get back to being a scholar."

"You ever been at sea since-except for coming from Ephra?"

"I took two merchanters to Tilbor. One as far as Nacliano, the other to Tilbora … well, not to Tilbora. We got caught in a storm and broke up on a reef north of the Barrens … except it wasn't a reef, but an ancient harbor wall. A place called…" He struggled to remember it … and finally did. "The Namer's Causeway."

"You fetched up along the Shallows Coast?"

Quaeryt nodded.

"Not many do that and live to tell of it."

"I did. Later, when he came to Tilbor, Lord Bhayar cleaned out the last of the ship reavers and brigands."

"I imagine a few people were pleased with that."

Quaeryt shrugged. "The ship reavers had driven out most honest folk."

"But … it took Lord Bhayar … later…?"

Quaeryt understood exactly what Nykaal wanted to ask. "I was still learning about imaging. It's very dangerous, and most imagers die young. I knew that. So I was cautious as a youth, but that meant I hadn't learned much. I learned a great deal in the year that followed."

Because I didn't have much choice.

"That says why many of your imager undercaptains are young, I would judge."

"Either young or older and cautious. I've kept the younger ones with me until they gain more experience."

"There are others?"

"Oh, yes," replied Quaeryt with a smile, although he decided against providing more specific details.

"I wasn't aware that there were so many imagers in Telaryn."

"There aren't that many, compared to all the people, but there are

a number. The ones who are careful to hide their talents are the ones who have survived. That's why you don't see or hear of very many. Lord Bhayar decided that if he offered a reward for the safe handing over of young imagers who might otherwise have perished, they might prove useful in the war against Bovaria, and they have."

"But … after the war … would they not be … a danger?"

"Most imagers present as much danger as perhaps a half squad of troopers. Some present no more danger than a man with a club. A very few present greater danger." Quaeryt smiled. "But then, so does a great warship, or a great commander in battle. A good ruler is one who knows how to turn such dangers into tools to support his rule. Lord Bhayar is good at that. It's one of his talents that his enemies have often overlooked."

"I can see that." Nykaal nodded. "Good leaders often have that talent. Once had a young seaman who'd been a cat burglar. Best topsail man I ever knew."

"What happened to him?"

"Served his term and left. He's likely either wealthy or dead. That's the problem with unusual talents. They're not always used in ways that those with power appreciate."

"And even when they are, others with power may not appreciate those talents."

"I imagine that is a possibility."

"That's always a possibility." Quaeryt laughed, then added, "Those in power often have dreams above their abilities, which is why they would punish others with greater abilities, if they but could. It's even more dangerous to dream above one's abilities than to rightfully pursue one's abilities."

"Too true … but many might question the idea of what is rightful. Does having power make it right? We all know that being right in itself does not create power."

"You've thought long on this, I'd wager," replied Quaeryt. "I don't know that there's an answer that would suit the Nameless. I'm certain that the one that would suit the Namer is that might makes right. I would say that the more power one has, the greater the duty to use it wisely. Unhappily, the greater the power, the fewer the number of people who can place a check on that power or insist that it be used wisely. Still … I do know that Lord Bhayar has pondered this dilemma and that he has considered ways in which he can exercise his powers wisely. One of the problems he faces, as you must have considered, is that using power wisely is not always perceived as being in the interests of others who wish to see their power and influence grow, whether it should or not."

"Is that always not in the eye of the beholder?" Nykaal's reply

was sardonic.

"Always," replied Quaeryt. "That was Rex Kharst's problem. He wished his power to be greater than it was when he scarcely was able to rule his own land. Did you know that he did not even have regional governors? Or that he entrusted tariff collections to factors and High Holders with no accounting procedures?" Quaeryt shook his head. "Lord Bhayar's rule will be a blessing to most, although I do worry about the clamor for the creation of more high holdings in Bovaria."

"Is not that why many have supported Lord Bhayar?"

"That, too, is possible," replied Quaeryt, "but one thing I have learned as a commander and a governor is that putting ambition before order is always ill-considered because nothing that is not ordered endures."

"Spoken like a scholar!"

No … spoken like a realist in a world of overambitious men. "Who else would say such?"

"You have interesting thoughts, Commander, but I should check our heading once more." Nykaal smiled and turned.

Quaeryt watched the captain walk back toward the helmsman, wondering with what opponent of Bhayar Nykaal was allied or supporting.

43

Although the lookouts on the *Montagne* sighted sails on a number of occasions over the next three days, those vessels either kept on course away from the two warships or immediately changed headings to avoid closing. As Quaeryt half expected, the seas in the Gulf were rougher than on the outward voyage, and at times salt spray froze on the railings and deck at night, but there had been no storms … so far. The rough seas had resulted in many troopers hanging over the rails at times, but the numbers had decreased by Meredi afternoon.

Nykaal had been friendly, but had refrained from any more probing questions, even though he had eaten breakfast and dinner with Quaeryt and Vaelora every day.

On Meredi evening, Quaeryt, Vaelora, and Nykaal sat around the circular table after a dinner of white gravy over biscuits and mutton, filling but little more than that. The lager that Quaeryt sipped was far better than the fare.

"Do you really think that the Khellans will agree to terms with Lord Bhayar, now that they believe themselves to be free?" asked Nykaal.

"I think they will find that being free in the circumstances in which they find themselves will leave them with little real freedom." Quaeryt sipped the lager, waiting to see where Nykaal's questions might lead.

"Will that not encourage the Bovarians who are dissatisfied with Bhayar to cross into Khel? It would seem that might make taking Khel even more difficult."

"I don't think many will try that during winter, and those that do will likely not survive. By spring, matters may well be different."

"How might that be?"

"Lord Bhayar will likely have a far firmer hand on Bovaria, and many who are dissatisfied now will be less so … or less of a problem by then."

"Will he not have to increase tariffs to pay for the war?"

"Not more than he already has, I would wager. He recovered much of Kharst's treasury, and since Kharst's armies were destroyed, there is no need to pay them. Bhayar's forces can be paid from what Kharst had set aside." *For the next half year, at least.*

"By your own words, then Khel has little to fear from Bovaria or Lord Bhayar in the months, or even in the years ahead."

Quaeryt glanced at Vaelora, who smiled politely, then sipped a glass of red wine. She'd scarcely drunk half a goblet all evening.

"Oh … Khel has much to fear," replied Quaeryt. "Lord Bhayar

will do nothing to stop traders and factors from overwhelming Khel. If the Khellans resort to force or try to stop trading, then Bhayar will be forced to use force, and the Khellans will lose any possibility of favorable terms. The High Council knows this, but they must convince the people. If they do not, Lord Bhayar is in no worse a position, and does not have to fight a winter war."

"I respect your scholarly reason, Commander, but I have my doubts that the Khellan Council will think it through so reasonably."

"They don't have to, Captain," Vaelora said sweetly. "Quaeryt spelled it out quite clearly for them. They were less than pleased, but they understood."

"Understanding does not always lead to the desired results, I fear," said Nykaal.

"I could not agree with you more," said Quaeryt warmly. "That is why we have armies and warships. And why rulers trust those who pledge allegiance the most who can back their understanding with power of one sort or another. There are many with power, and more than a few with understanding, but few indeed with both." He took another sip of the lager. "This is very good. Might I ask where you got it?"

"A friend sent it to me from Tilbor actually. There's a High Holder there who brews a truly fine lager. I was fortunate to receive a keg, and able to keep it cool."

"It is excellent, even after all that travel."

"I'm glad you like it."

For the next quint or so, before Nykaal retired and left Quaeryt and Vaelora to their own devices, the conversation remained firmly on lager, wines, and other matters of cuisine and cultured dining. Even as he made various comments and observations, Quaeryt kept thinking about the lager … and how and where it had come to Nykaal.

Quaeryt sat at the circular table, thinking, while Vaelora prepared herself for bed, noting absently that the *Montagne*'s pitching had subsided slightly.

Suddenly Vaelora appeared at his shoulder. "Oh … I didn't mean to give you a start. I thought you might wish to read this, dearest. Our conversation brought this to mind." Vaelora handed *Rholan and the Nameless* to Quaeryt, a thin strip of leather marking the page.

"Thank you." Quaeryt eased from the chair and moved closer to the sole oil lamp still lit, opened the volume, and began to read.

The problem of righteousness is that while most people wish to be perceived as righteous and comporting themselves as good people, many do not wish to make the effort or to pay the prices required. This is one reason why many come to the anomen, for there, by their presence and without words or much effort, they can proclaim their

goodness. This is also why, Rholan believed, those whose faith rests on the need to be perceived as good fear and attack anything that might reveal the shallowness of their belief.

He was quite candid, if in private, in revealing that he was unsure of what the Nameless might wish of him, while insisting that to act for what he believed to be good, even if others did not approve, was all that the Nameless could expect, given that the Nameless had seen fit to leave the definition of good to men and women. Moreover, because in their hearts they know they are not as good as they should be, they despise those who display themselves publicly as paragons of virtue, and rejoice when those paragons fall from grace or are shown to have hidden their true nature behind a silver mask of false virtue.

He closed the book and nodded. “Yes … I have had some thoughts along those lines.” *Long before tonight, but tonight was just another example.*

Later, when they lay in the bunk, side by side, Vaelora murmured in Quaeryt’s ear, “It’s a good thing you’re returning to Bovaria.”

“I fear that it is.” *I just hope that matters, whatever they may be, have not progressed so far that more great bloodshed cannot be avoided.* But he had strong doubts about that.

44

Vendrei morning had dawned overcast, and by ninth glass, the clouds that had appeared out of the west had thickened, darkened, and threatened rain. Quaeryt stood on the starboard side of the sterncastle's upper deck, studying the sea to the south, where he'd glimpsed the sails of several ships, heading westward, he thought. Even after a quint of watching, the distant sails had not moved appreciably closer, but were definitely on a westerly course.

Finally, he walked toward the helm, where Nykaal had positioned himself, because Quaeryt had seen the captain receiving reports from the lookouts. When it appeared Nykaal was not unduly occupied or concentrating, Quaeryt asked, "Can you tell me about the ships to the south … besides their being on a westerly course?"

"Three carrack-type merchanters. They look to be Ferran outbound from Kephria. They're riding high, and they haven't ballasted heavily enough for what little they're likely carrying. If they're carrying much of anything at all."

That the vessels were Ferran, partly empty, and outbound made sense. Antiagon traders usually carried their own goods, light and high value items such as silk and fine cottons, in their own bottoms.

"That means they were inbound heavily laden." Quaeryt frowned. "I wonder if they were carrying worked iron of some sort." There wasn't much metal-working in Antiago, and the southern half of the land, that part bordering the ocean, was rugged and hilly, with comparatively fewer people, while the east backed up to the seemingly endless Sud Swamp. Quaeryt would have been astonished if the population of Antiago amounted to a tenth part of that of even old Telaryn.

"Cannon … muskets … blades, you think?"

"It wouldn't have to be that. Just tools. The Ferrans had enough time to realize that Aliaro wouldn't be getting any more iron goods smuggled from Bovaria or from outlanders who picked up iron tools in Solis and shipped them to Estisle or Kephria. Bhayar tariffs the iron leaving Telaryn heavily, but he can't prevent foreign bottoms from sailing to Antiago."

"Not unless he wants to build a fleet," replied Nykaal.

"In time, he or Clayar may have to."

For a moment Nykaal seemed to consider Quaeryt's words, as if weighing them. "You think so?"

"Once he consolidates all Lydar, he won't need as many troopers, and the greatest threats will be to traders and shippers."

"Don't know as I'll be manning a deck when that happens."

"That's why I said Bhayar or his son. It depends on how ambitious he is and how long he rules."

Nykaal nodded. "That's true of any ruler."

"Seems to me that we're making fair progress."

"A steady following wind helps." Nykaal looked back to the west. "If the winds pick up too much more, we'll have to reef sail."

"The clouds aren't that dark. You might be fortunate and just get rain and good winds."

"Still have to keep a close eye on them." Nykaal looked back and then toward the helm.

Quaeryt took the hint and moved back toward the railing once more.

Later that afternoon, Quaeryt sat at the circular table in the captain's stateroom. Vaelora sat across from him. The clouds of the morning had thickened and darkened, and cold raindrops pelted against the glass of the portholes, and the *Montagne* continued to pitch and dip with the long regular following swells as she headed southeast.

Vaelora covered her mouth, trying not to burp. "How much longer will we be on this course?"

"Until we pass Cape Morain. Then we'll have another day or so heading northeast, maybe longer, if we head into prevailing winds out of the north."

"When we get to Geusyn, what will you write Bhayar?"

"Just what happened, and the fact that the High Council is considering his terms over the winter, and that it made little sense to remain there … but to return to Geusyn where we can support Submarshal Skarpa in the interim. Do you disagree with that?"

"No. That's the best we can do. What will you tell Skarpa?"

"Beyond what happened? I'll just have to see. I may not have to tell him anything. If all the border High Holders refuse to offer allegiance to Bhayar or, worse, attempt to claim allegiance to Antiago, and if Aliaro won't disown or surrender them…"

"Then there will be war with Antiago?"

"Do you think your brother is likely to allow High Holders to secede from Bovaria and Telaryn?"

"Not once he discovers such, but it would take more than two weeks for him to discover that and issue orders."

"He has two envoys committed to speak for him in terms of pledging allegiance to Lord Bhayar and Telaryn."

"Those credentials were meant for dealing with Khel."

"Remember what we discussed while we were still on the Great Canal…?"

"You think he was thinking about rebelling High Holders?"

Quaeryt shrugged. “I have the feeling he was concerned, but he didn’t want to spell that out. Why else would he have waited until the last moment to provide our credentials and hand them to us personally less than a glass before we departed?”

“He’s protecting himself. If what we do goes well, he can claim he anticipated it. If not, he can say we exceeded his authority.”

“I don’t think it’s that. He expects us to deal with any such problems, but he doesn’t want anyone else to know he’s delegating that much authority until afterward. Then he can claim he authorized it all along.”

“Why? Because you’re a scholar and an imager, and I’m a woman and his sister?”

“Something like that,” Quaeryt said. “Look who surrounds him.”

“That’s been his choice.”

“Given Telaryn and Bovaria … has he had that much choice?”

“Probably not,” replied Vaelora grudgingly.

Quaeryt nodded.

“What aren’t you saying?” Vaelora’s glance at Quaeryt was not quite accusing.

“Why do you think I’ve tried not to be too obvious in what I’ve done? Well … ever since Extela.”

“Destroying armies isn’t obvious?”

“Have I done a thing to claim personal credit? Haven’t I always made sure that all the imagers were considered part of what happened? Weren’t they the ones most visible in improving and repairing things?”

After several moments Vaelora finally spoke. “I’m not certain you’ve been as unobvious as you’d like, but you certainly have avoided taking credit. That’s true.”

“I’d prefer to build the imagers into a stronger force so that they’re considered as a power in the same way High Holders or factors are … so that no one will think that eliminating a strong imager or a leader will destroy their power.”

“That also protects us.”

“That would be my hope.”

Vaelora smiled, if but in passing. Then, after several moments, she spoke. “What you said about not being obvious … it reminded me of something else.”

“What might that be?”

“*Rholan and the Nameless*.”

“I’ve thought a lot about it. You know that. What are you thinking?”

“I keep wondering who wrote the book.”

“It had to be someone who knew him closely.”

“But who knew him that closely?” replied Vaelora. “It couldn’t be family … or children. He didn’t have any.”

“So far as we know,” said Quaeryt dryly.

“Do you really think he had a mistress or bastard children?”

“Probably not,” conceded Quaeryt.

“The writer says he never married.”

“Then it had to have been one of his followers.”

“That’s a problem, too. If what the writer says about him is true, he could be pretty prickly. Besides, none of the other stories about him mention any devoted followers. He had admirers, but people who were close to him?” Vaelora shook her head.

“Then who did write it?”

“I don’t know … yet … but there has to be a clue somewhere in the book.”

“Just like everything has clues?” he asked with a laugh, grasping the edge of the circular table as the *Montagne* abruptly pitched and rolled simultaneously.

“Not everything,” she replied. “Not everything.”

Especially not everything where women are concerned. But he only said, “That’s true.”

45

Both the rain and strong following winds continued for almost another day before both subsided. Finally, on Solayi morning, the *Montagne* and the *Solis* crept up the last few milles of the Gulf of Khellor toward Ephra under hazy skies that blocked most heat from the sun and left frost on any shaded section of the ship's decks. Quaeryt stood on the sterncastle deck in the raw cold that might have been truly bitter, even in his heavy winter riding jacket, had the wind amounted to any more than the faintest breeze. Vaelora had joined Quaeryt briefly, then retreated to the stateroom when it had become clear that the *Montagne*'s progress was slow, that there was little to see, and that Quaeryt was not the best of company.

Nykaal did not move from his post near the helm, but his head and eyes never stopped searching, even after the lookouts reported sighting no ships moored either at Ephra or Kephria.

The fact that there were no ships in the harbor at Kephria or moored offshore, combined with the sighting of vessels leaving Antiagon waters lightly loaded, or perhaps without any outbound cargoes, had Quaeryt fretting. What had happened in Geusyn? Had the local High Holders turned their forces against Skarpa? Was the Autarch backing them? Or had they retreated into Antiago? Or had something even worse occurred?

Finally, as the *Montagne* neared Ephra, Nykaal crossed the deck to where Quaeryt stood.

"Commander, how do you want to handle debarkation … and where?"

"What would you recommend as the fastest way to get the men to Geusyn and you on your way back to Kherseilles?"

"Those aren't quite the same objectives, Commander. It would be far faster for the *Montagne* if we moored at Ephra."

"But getting the men to Geusyn would take longer?"

Nykaal nodded.

"Then we should use the best method to get the men to Geusyn quickly."

"I thought that might be your decision, given your concerns about the High Holders and Autarch Aliaro. We can sail farther north, if we stay to the west, and we can use the pinnaces…"

Quaeryt listened as Nykaal explained what he proposed, essentially using the pinnaces to ferry the troopers to a point south of Geusyn and then letting the river carry the empty pinnaces back out to the *Montagne.*

By the second glass of the afternoon, the first pinnace, carrying

Zhelan and most of the first squad of first company, was under sail toward the lower ferry piers of Geusyn. From what Quaeryt could tell, there were no troopers in the area, and there was no cannon fire from the northern walls of Kephria. Still … he worried.

The second pinnace-from the *Solis*-arrived and took second squad. More than a glass later, the first pinnace returned to the *Montagne,* this time for Quaeryt and Vaelora, the undercaptains, and half of third squad.

The River Laar was choppy, and the spray from the waves was so cold that it stung when it hit the exposed flesh. By the time Quaeryt helped Vaelora out of the pinnace at the lower ferry piers, he had the feeling that his face was reddened and almost frostbitten.

Zhelan greeted them immediately.

"As you requested, sir, I sent word to Submarshal Skarpa. He holds the River Inn as his headquarters. Your mounts are waiting up on the road. His dispatch said that he looked forward to meeting with you at your earliest convenience."

"Thank you, Major." Quaeryt smiled warmly. "As always."

"My pleasure, sir, Lady Vaelora."

When they walked off the piers and up the packed clay lane to the road, Quaeryt was pleased to see his mount, the mare that had literally carried him across Lydar from Tilbora all the way to Geusyn. She looked rested and healthy, he had to admit, as did Vaelora's gelding.

From the road Quaeryt looked south, but the tall walls of Kephria looked no different from when he had last seen them, except that most of the trees had finally lost their leaves, leaving the few pines as the sources of green in the brush immediately north of the walls.

Three quints later they reined up outside the River Inn. Once Quaeryt had Vaelora settled-in the same chamber they'd occupied previously, doubtless due to orders from Skarpa-he hurried down to find the submarshal-in the larger plaques room, with maps spread across the circular plaques table.

Skarpa gestured to one of the seats. "I got word that you'd returned. What happened?"

"About what we expected. They'll consider Bhayar's terms over the winter."

"Over the winter? The winter's almost half gone."

"Not really. You know that the snow in the north lasts well into Maris." Quaeryt let a sigh escape. "They know Bhayar doesn't want to invade Khel at the moment. They also know that in the future, if they don't agree to terms, he will. The High Council can't convince the people to agree unless a threat is more imminent. They feel that way, in any case."

"And you don't want to turn Khel into a wasteland."

"Not really. But I'll do what's necessary if I have to." *Because Bhayar won't feel safe without a unified Lydar, and if he doesn't feel safe, imagers won't ever be safe, either.*

"The Pharsi can be stiff-necked and then some."

"That worries me." Quaeryt shook his head. "What's happening here?"

"The Khellans are right about Bhayar not being able to invade Khel." Skarpa snorted. "Things aren't good here, and they're getting worse."

"I had the feeling that you might be having trouble. That's another reason why we returned. Because the merchanters left as soon as we off-loaded in Kherseilles, I had to leave Khaern and half of Eleventh Regiment in Kherseilles. After the *Montagne* and the *Solis* finish off-loading the half of the regiment they could bring, they're to head back and pick up Khaern. The Khellans banished Calkoran…" Quaeryt went on to brief Skarpa on the rest of the situation, but not what happened at the Hall of the Heavens. When he finished, he waited for the submarshal's reaction.

"So … for taking care of his men, Calkoran faces death or exile?" Skarpa shook his head. "They think Bhayar or Aliaro are going to leave them alone?"

"No … but they'll want to haggle for a better deal."

"That could get them a sharper blade at their throats."

"But later," Quaeryt pointed out. "Most people think that delays will result in matters getting better. Even the Pharsi."

"That's like trying to harvest fodder once the snow starts falling."

"It sounds like the High Holders here are proving a problem."

Skarpa snorted. "Does it snow in winter? Does too much lager turn a man into an idiot? Oh … they've all been very polite. Somehow, it's never convenient for them to receive me, and when I've appeared with a battalion, the hold is open, and no one's there, and the steward knows nothing, and the High Holder has all the keys, sir. What's worse is that the roads from Geusyn are terrible. In places, they barely exist, and every hold seems perched on a rocky summit surrounded by forests that almost might be Otelyrnan jungles. It seems like that, anyway."

"They have to have roads somewhere."

"We came across one that was slightly better. It was headed south into the Lohan Hills."

"It might go all the way into Antiago." Quaeryt fingered his chin, with his left hand, again conscious of the two immobile fingers. "Perhaps we should insist on pledges of allegiance to Bhayar and payment of token tariffs. That's what Bhayar required of the High

Holders in other areas."

"I've mentioned that, but they've ignored it. They claim I don't have the authority."

Abruptly Quaeryt smiled. "I think Vaelora and I might have the answers." He eased out the leather case he'd carried all across Lydar, then extracted the credentials document. He stood and walked around the table to lay the document before Skarpa. "Read this part."

Skarpa studied the words, then frowned and said, "You're empowered to make anyone comply with terms of allegiance to Lord Bhayar of Telaryn. The only restriction is that whatever you do can't limit the existing powers and authorities of Lord Bhayar…" He shook his head. "The High Holders will claim…"

"It doesn't matter. Vaelora is Bhayar's sister, and she has the same credentials, word for word … and you now have seven imagers."

At that, Skarpa laughed. "So how would you recommend we proceed?"

"Send a message to the nearest High Holder, saying that a special envoy from Lord Bhayar will be visiting the hold, say at midday on Mardi, to receive the High Holder's allegiance, and that his absence, given his reluctance to meet with Lord Bhayar's dutifully appointed submarshal, will be regarded as proof of failure of allegiance."

"And what will failure of allegiance result in?" asked Skarpa.

"I'm thinking the destruction of the entire hold house and outbuildings. Bovarian High Holders don't seem all that inclined to respond to anything less than death or destruction."

"You don't think we should spell that out in the message?"

"No. Lord Bhayar shouldn't have to do that. Courtesy, respect, and allegiance shouldn't be withheld until destruction is threatened."

"But that's what you're doing…"

Quaeryt shook his head. "The destruction is for failure to show respect. If it goes that far, we bring down the first hold … and send a message to the second, just like the one to the first."

"They'll all agree after that."

"I'm not so certain about that. The accounts aren't clear, but some few functionaries indicated to Bhayar's clerks that they weren't certain that some of the southern High Holders had paid tariffs in years."

"With Bhayar's crossbowmen after them?"

"They each have small armies, no roads, forests like jungles, and Kharst really didn't have much of a governing structure away from the rivers."

"You think that they've been providing a buffer between Kharst and Aliaro?"

"It wouldn't surprise me." *But then, the way things are going, nothing would.*

“What do you think Aliaro will do? That’s the question, isn’t it?” Skarpa paused. “You’re thinking of invading Antiago, aren’t you?”

“Only if necessary, and only if it appears likely we can conquer it.”

“I wasn’t dispatched here for that, you know?”

“I know. You were ordered to deal with any threats raised by Aliaro and the southern High Holders. But … what if the only way to deal with both of those is to eliminate Aliaro?”

“Do you think it will come to that?”

“I’d be surprised if it didn’t. I’d also be surprised if Bhayar would be terribly astonished. After all, you’re no longer under Deucalon’s command, are you?”

“No. I’m to report to Lord Bhayar directly. How did you know that?”

“I didn’t. But it has to be that way if you’re to be effective. Neither Deucalon nor Myskyl wants you to be too successful, and Bhayar knows that.”

“You’re wasted as a commander, Quaeryt.”

Quaeryt shook his head. “Bhayar can’t afford to recognize a scholar and an imager in a position much higher than a commander.” After a moment he added, “And I can’t afford to be recognized, either, especially at my age.”

“You can’t keep what you are a secret.”

“Unfortunately not. But so long as I’m perceived to be under the control of and subordinate to officers like you, it will only make the High Holders and other senior officers uneasy, rather than having them unite in opposition to Bhayar and to me.” Quaeryt managed a smile. “Shall we draft a letter?”

“I suggest that we draft letters to all five of them, setting a date for meeting the second High Holder as well, and telling the others that you and Vaelora will inform me of the dates of their meetings.”

“That makes more sense,” agreed Quaeryt. “Otherwise, matters will drag out.”

“They will anyway.”

Quaeryt nodded.

46

Lundi morning, Quaeryt first met with Subcommander Alazyn in the smallest of the inn's plaques rooms.

"What have you been doing?" asked Quaeryt as soon as Alazyn settled into the chair on the other side of the battered circular table.

"Having the companies ride patrols. It's been quiet. Don't think the locals have seen this many troopers ever."

"What about the High Holders? Have you seen any of their men?"

"About a week after you left, we saw a squad of riders in gold and green. They saw us and took to a path through the woods. Haven't seen anyone in a uniform since. Neither have any of the submarshal's regiments, either, even when they tried to visit some of the high holdings."

"That's what the submarshal said. It's likely things will change in the next week. I'll be doing some scouting today with first company. Now … give me a report on all your battalions."

"Yes, sir. First battalion…" Alazyn offered concise and thoughtful reports on the readiness and strength of each battalion.

When he finished, Quaeryt went to find Zhelan and to inspect first company. Then, at two quints past seventh glass, Quaeryt and the imager undercaptains, as well as first company, rode out of Geusyn with Skarpa's scouts. Less than half a mille outside the town, the rutted road they followed to the east-southeast narrowed to a clay track barely wide enough for a single wagon or two horses abreast.

Quaeryt frowned. According to the map Skarpa had provided the nearest high holding was that of one High Holder Chaelaet, and it was some three milles east of the east river road.

"Undercaptain Horan, forward."

"Yes, sir."

"I'd like you to clear the area on each side of the road, so that there's ten yards beyond each shoulder. Do it in whatever way requires the least effort on your part. Begin by clearing with a stretch some twenty yards forward of us on each side."

"Yes, sir."

Horan concentrated.

After a moment a wave of cold air swept across the front of the column, and a thin misty fog filled the air to the east. As the light breeze carried it away, Quaeryt could see that Horan's imaging had removed anything that had been growing taller than a few digits and dumped the refuse into a packed mass against the remaining trees, effectively creating a barrier nearly two yards high that extended almost thirty yards ahead.

"How do you feel?" asked Quaeryt.

"I could do a few more of those, sir."

"I'll have you alternate. That way you can do more over the day. Undercaptain Threkhyl, forward!"

Threkhyl rode forward, and as the column moved down the road, somewhat smoothed out by Horan's imaging, Quaeryt explained what he wanted done once more. Threkhyl cleared the next fifty yards, and first company moved on. Even so, it took more than a glass to clear the first half mille, and Quaeryt ordered a short break after that.

The second half mille took a good glass and a half. To clear the shoulders and smooth road for the entire three milles and the hundred-odd yards up the side road to the rough stone pillars marking the hill lane leading up to Chaelaet's hold took until well after second glass of the afternoon. That wouldn't have been possible had Quaeryt not cleared several hundred-yard stretches himself.

As the weary undercaptains rested and drank from their water bottles, Quaeryt studied the area to the east. The gray-walled hold was more like a chateau fort, sitting on the top of a narrow ridge composed mainly of light gray rock that rose some fifty yards above the surrounding forest. The walls themselves didn't seem that high, perhaps three yards, but they had been constructed at the top of a steep rocky slope a good fifty yards long that had been cleared of vegetation and soil. The hold and the outbuildings weren't that extensive, making it possible that the other imagers might be able to flatten all the structures without assistance from Quaeryt.

Although Quaeryt couldn't be certain, the lack of trees on the far side of the lower slopes of the ridge suggested that large expanses of fields and meadows lay to the east on the north side of the road. That made sense, because anyone from the west-and the River Laar-would have to pass the fortified hilltop to reach the more productive lands. The narrowness of the road and the closeness of the trees-before the imagers had changed that-would also have made any attackers on the hold vulnerable to continual assault. While a regimental-sized force could have survived such an attack, the casualties would have been significant in dealing with just one High Holder.

Quaeryt nodded. That was important, given that Skarpa had identified five High Holders within a day's ride to the east, all located just north of the border with Antiago.

Zhelan eased his mount up beside Quaeryt's mare. "The scouts have found some tracks on the road. They're not that recent, and they're all headed away from Geusyn."

"Yesterday?"

"Late yesterday, most likely."

Quaeryt nodded, his eyes still on the rocky hill and its hold.

"There's a good half mille of narrow lane up to the lower gate, sir, and the lane to the upper gate is walled."

"I thought it might be. That's why I wanted the road cleared."

"Will you have to have imagers do that for the next holding?"

Quaeryt shrugged. "I don't know. The next nearest high holding is more than ten milles from here. I suspect we'll have to do some clearing in dealing with other High Holders, but how much and when will depend on what happens tomorrow."

Zhelan studied the hill hold for a time before speaking. "That hold looks like it has never been taken."

"It probably hasn't. Rex Kharst was a sovereign in name only in parts of Bovaria. That makes matters harder for Lord Bhayar."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but it makes things harder for you, the submarshal, the undercaptains, and the troopers."

"I stand corrected, Zhelan," replied Quaeryt with a soft laugh. "But if word gets out that any group of High Holders can defy Lord Bhayar…"

"I understand, sir."

"For your information," Quaeryt said softly, "I'm not planning on risking troopers unless we're attacked on the road. Nor will there be an attack or a siege on fortified positions if a holder refuses allegiance to Lord Bhayar." He took a deep breath. "That may be hard on some Bovarians who are innocent, but I see no point in risking men unnecessarily."

"That was why you cleared the roadway today?"

"Yes." *And also to start building up more strength in the imagers.*

"You don't think that this Chaelaet will pledge allegiance, do you?"

"No. He'll either evade pledging, or withdraw from his hold, or close his gates and defy us to do our worst." *Not understanding what that might be.*

"There are some who will not learn."

"No," replied Quaeryt sadly, "there are some who have never had to learn until it is too late."

47

Early on Mardi, with sky barely graying, Quaeryt pulled on his uniform and then his boots. From the bed, covers pulled up around her shoulders, in the dim light of a single oil lamp, Vaelora watched.

"You don't like doing this, do you?" she finally asked.

"No, but the High Holders here aren't any better than Kharst was. They might be worse, and letting any of them defy Bhayar will lead to more and more trouble. Our forces are spread out, and we need to end this defiance quickly while losing as few troopers as possible."

"People will say Bhayar's worse than Kharst."

"So long as it's only High Holders who say that, your brother can live with it."

"Dearest … what if the High Holders here were what kept the Autarch from taking over this part of Bovaria?"

"I've thought about that, but Bhayar still can't afford to have them making trouble. Or do you think I'm wrong?"

Vaelora shook her head. "But to establish his rule … especially with imagers…"

"I know. We'll be the ones feared, especially by the High Holders. That's why we'll need a safe enclave, and a lot more imagers, when it's all over." Quaeryt offered a rueful smile. "But we're also what he needs to rule, independent of the High Holders."

"You've never liked the High Holders."

"I've liked more than a few," Quaeryt replied. "I don't like the present systems of High Holders, either in Telaryn or in Bovaria. The Khellan High Council is better, but I'd worry that something like that would eventually deteriorate into something run by factors or their equivalent."

"Why? The councilors aren't factors."

"Because the factors are the future, and they'll control more and more of trade and golds. It's already happening in Telaryn and Bovaria, in different ways. High Holders who are into trade and shipping are coming to dominate Telaryn while the wealthy factors in Bovaria control many of the towns and cities. The council system will fall to wealth. The imagers won't."

"That's only if you're successful," Vaelora pointed out.

"Then *we'd* best be successful."

"And I'd best get dressed," replied Vaelora.

"Alas…"

"Enough of that, you lecherous imager." But she did smile as she eased herself from the covers. "We also need to eat."

By seventh glass, the force escorting Vaelora and Quaeryt to meet

with High Holder Chaelaet was assembling on the main road just to the south and east of Geusyn. Skarpa and Quaeryt had decided that a single regiment and first company were more than enough. Quaeryt hadn't wanted to bring Vaelora, but there was always the off chance that Chaelaet was more intelligent than his previous behavior suggested and that he was willing to meet with Quaeryt and Vaelora and pledge allegiance to Bhayar.

By two quints past the glass, the scouts were headed out. Quaeryt, Skarpa, and Vaelora rode behind the vanguard, a company from Sixteenth Regiment, with the imager undercaptains and first company immediately behind them.

Two quints later they arrived at the point where the imagers had widened the road and the open space. Skarpa looked at the road ahead, then at the cleared area beside it, and finally at Quaeryt. "You've had the imagers busy."

"They didn't have much to do in Khel, except drills. The track they called a road was too narrow."

"What about you?"

"Some, but not enough. I was busy yesterday as well."

"You widened it all the way to Chaelaet's holding? Why?"

"To his gateposts. As for why … this part of Bovaria needs better roads, both for the safety of the troopers and for the future."

"After seeing this, Chaelaet certainly won't be there now."

"He might not," replied Quaeryt, "but he's more likely to be there if he happened to be there yesterday. I suspect he left earlier."

Skarpa offered a noncommittal nod.

A glass later they reached the end of the widened road, and Skarpa called a halt.

"It looks mostly empty," observed Vaelora. "It's winter, but only a few chimneys show any sign of smoke."

"He'll have left his retainers. He may have even left defenders." Skarpa looked to Quaeryt. "Do you still want to go ahead with your plan?"

Quaeryt nodded. "We can shield a company from attack for a short while … long enough to withdraw. Then we'll clear the road"-*as well as anyone close to it*-"and the regiment can advance to a point below the gates. From there, the imagers can destroy the hold, wall by wall, building by building."

"I'm wagering the woods are empty." Skarpa's smile was wintry.

"I wouldn't take that wager, but here in Bovaria, who can tell? If they don't attack, we'll approach the gates. What happens after that depends on what they do."

"Or don't," replied Skarpa.

Quaeryt turned and looked at his wife.

"Be careful," murmured Vaelora.

"I will," he promised, then ordered, "First company! Forward."

Quaeryt wasn't that surprised that he and first company were not attacked on the ride up the curving road to the bridge that crossed the depression between the road and the chateau gates, a space some fifteen yards wide and roughly that deep. He was surprised that the bridge was not a drawbridge and that the chateau gates were open.

Two guards stood at the far side. They appeared to be waiting, as if they'd expected Quaeryt and his men. Between them stood a white-haired man in green and gold livery. His face was pale.

Green and gold…? Abruptly Quaeryt nodded. Then he studied the bridge. From what he could tell, it looked solid.

"Welcome to Laetor, Submarshal. You may enter as you wish," called the older man.

"First squad," suggested Zhelan quietly.

Quaeryt nodded.

"First squad! Forward!"

Quaeryt watched as the troopers eased their mounts past him and the scouts and then across the timbered and lightly railed bridge barely wide enough for two mounts abreast or a small wagon. The bridge creaked slightly, he thought, but he could see no movement of the timbers as the troopers crossed the span.

Still maintaining shields, Quaeryt followed them, with Zhelan beside him and the remainder of first company behind him.

The white-haired man had retreated to the far side of the stone paved space inside the walls and gates, gates that did not appear to have been closed in some time. Once first company was re-formed inside the courtyard, Quaeryt rode forward, reining up short of where the speaker stood before the ironbound doors to what appeared to be the main keep.

"High Holder Chaelaet requested that I tender his regrets that he was unable to meet with you, Submarshal."

Quaeryt decided against correcting him. "Who are you?"

"Loetnyn, the assistant steward." The white-haired man offered a resigned expression.

"Where might High Holder Chaelaet be at present?"

"I could not say, sir, save that he is not anywhere in the hold or in the nearby properties."

That didn't surprise Quaeryt. "Do all the High Holder's armsmen wear green and gold?"

"Sir?"

Quaeryt waited.

"Yes, sir. They always have."

That settled another question, and it definitely made Quaeryt

even less sympathetic to the absent High Holder. “How many people are in the hold at the moment?”

“I couldn’t say exactly, sir. There are fifty some servants, usually, but a number are with the High Holder and his family. I could not say exactly. Perhaps a score.”

“And their families?”

“Most live in the village.”

“That’s at the end of the walled walk and steps to the east?”

Loetnyn frowned, his eyes taking in the mounted and armed men who filled the courtyard. “Yes, sir.”

“You are to pass the word that everyone-every last man, woman, and child-is to be beyond the walls of the hold in less than a glass. Anyone who remains will die. While they are leaving, you will show us the items of value suitable to be saved and given to Lord Bhayar.”

Loetnyn’s mouth dropped open. He swallowed without speaking. Finally, he managed a weak, “But … sir…”

“What did High Holder Chaelaet expect, steward? He has not pledged allegiance to Lord Bhayar. He will not meet with his envoys.”

“He said … sir … to tell you that he expected the courtesy due any High Holder.” Loetnyn swallowed.

“He has offered no courtesy and no acknowledgment of allegiance to Lord Bhayar. He can scarcely expect it in return.”

“But…” Loetnyn appeared totally aghast, as if he could not believe what was about to happen.

“Enough,” said Quaeryt quietly.

It took almost two glasses to inspect the hold and all the rooms that might have held items of value. There were few of those, fewer than Quaeryt had expected, and he had not expected many given the location of the hold. Most of Chaelaet’s wealth had to lie in the lands and their harvests and possibly in timber.

There were no golds or silvers in the empty strong room. There was a magnificent harp in the holder’s personal quarters and a lute almost as precious, but no clavecin anywhere, not that Quaeryt would have been able to remove it. There were several tapestries, quite an array of worked silver, mainly for dining, and, surprisingly, an antique Cloisonyt vase glazed in shimmering green … possibly the single most valuable object in the hold, yet it had been almost buried in a cabinet holding worn silver pitchers.

All told, it took a small wagon to hold the various treasures.

The steward kept looking at Quaeryt as if he could not believe that a minion of Lord Bhayar would so casually loot a high holding.

You’re going to be even more shocked shortly. Unfortunately. Quaeryt turned to the assistant steward. “I do hope that everyone has left the hold.”

"You aren't going to fire it, are you?"

"No." Quaeryt paused. "We're going to level it into a heap of bricks and stone."

"… No…" The protest was barely murmured.

"Your master does not seem to have grasped the fact that Lord Bhayar does not brook defiance or even casual disregard."

"But … what of the people … the village?"

"We have no intention of touching either. Why do you think we gave you warning … and insisted on people leaving the hold?" Despite the warnings, Quaeryt had his doubts that everyone had left … but he'd done what he could.

Keeping Loetnyn with him, Quaeryt returned to the courtyard and gathered the imagers. "We're headed to the northern end of the hold. We'll bring down the walls and the buildings starting there."

Quaeryt watched as, numbly, Loetnyn walked beside the mare along the stone lane beside the main keep and past an overgrown space that looked to have once held gardens, with two large heaps of manure on the north end, and then between a long and moderately kept barracks across from a long stable. Quaeryt reined up in the space between the north end of the stable and barracks, where he studied the low walls and the small orchard beyond the paved area. Then he turned the saddle.

"Undercaptain Baelthm, forward."

When the oldest undercaptain rode forward, Quaeryt gestured toward the small outbuilding beneath the walls. "See what you can do to bring that down."

Baelthm looked quizzically at Quaeryt.

"Do what you can."

"Yes, sir."

Although Quaeryt was ready to help, Baelthm managed to bring the walls in and down by imaging away the keystone over the door and, Quaeryt suspected, by removing a small section of a support beam. Even so, the older imager was white and shaking when he finished.

"Good thinking. Drink something, and then eat some biscuits," said Quaeryt. "Undercaptain Khalis, forward."

"Yes, sir."

"Flatten as much of the wall as you can without totally exhausting yourself. I'd prefer that it collapse outward so that all the rubble falls over the cliffs."

Khalis nodded, then turned and concentrated.

After several moments the entire north wall, from corner tower to corner tower, a length of nearly seventy-five yards, shivered and then slowly tumbled outward, leaving only a set of massive foundation

stones protruding less than half a yard above the remaining ground.

"Undercaptain Lhandor, forward." Quaeryt waited, and then ordered, "The west wall from the corner back even with the north end of the stables."

More stones crumbled and then tumbled.

Section by section, Quaeryt and the imagers retreated, leveling walls and buildings, until the entire hold had been leveled except for the main keep, a four-level stone structure, and the walls and gates to the south of it. He'd also had Baelthm remove the narrow wooden bridge that led over another deep declivity to the path winding down the east side of the rocky hill to the village. The air was far colder than it had been two glasses before, and flakes of ice dropped out of the clear sky intermittently.

"Back across the bridge and hold!" Quaeryt ordered, then waited as first company crossed.

Once the entire force had withdrawn through the gates and across the bridge to the lane down to the main road, Quaeryt and the undercaptains followed them. Quaeryt doubted that any of the undercaptains were ready for powerful imaging-but they would be again by Meredi or Jeudi, when it would be necessary once more.

That meant he'd have to bring down the main keep and the remaining walls by himself. He'd studied the keep, and seen that the south wall seemed to lean. He squared himself in the saddle, then concentrated on the main keep, on drawing whatever warmth he could from the depths beneath the largely leveled hold and visualizing a seamless circular pillar in the middle of a smooth surface where there had been rubble rising skyward, composed of all the stones from the keep and the walls.

Light flared everywhere for a moment, then vanished.

Quaeryt rocked in the saddle, his head throbbing. He could still see, and what he saw was a white column some five yards across rising a good fifty yards above the flattened paved surface where there had been a hold. Surrounding the column was a white mist that slowly began to dissipate. Then the white surface split, and shards of ice cascaded down, leaving a featureless gray circular column with a flat top dominating the hill.

The wooden bridge had vanished, but so silently that, for a moment, not even Quaeryt had noticed.

Behind Quaeryt, no one said a word.

He glanced down. Loetnyn had turned pale. He stood there shuddering.

Quaeryt looked at the assistant steward. "Your master's high holding and the lands it once held are now the possessions of Lord Bhayar. Should he be unwise enough to attempt any action against

Lord Bhayar, his life will also be forfeit … and so will that of any man who joins him or fights for him."

"You … you are like the ancients returned."

"No. Unlike them, we will never rule. We only serve. And we serve those we believe to be the most just. Did we attempt to harm a single person in the hold?"

Loetnyn looked down.

"Go," said Quaeryt quietly, image-projecting authority and a sense of fairness and justice.

The assistant steward remained standing at the edge of the narrow road that ended at the bridgeless gorge. Then he turned and headed into the trees, stumbling as much as walking.

Quaeryt looked to Zhelan. "Order the company to return to the regiment."

"First company! Forward!"

Zhelan did not speak again until they had ridden more than a hundred yards down the lane, letting first company lead the way. "Do you think what you did will endear the peasants to Lord Bhayar?"

"Not at first," Quaeryt admitted.

"If this High Holder gathers his men, they will not desert him."

"Then they will die." Quaeryt sighed. "Perhaps by the second or third time, some holder's followers will understand."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but some will never understand why. They will only comply through fear."

"If that fear turns to respect, and I believe it will in time, all will be well." He paused, then asked quietly, "Do you have any suggestions for dealing with the next High Holder?"

The major did not reply for a time, then finally said, "I would that I did, sir. They are all … if one is charitable or kindly just, they see that as weakness. Yet they see any strength that they cannot overcome as vileness."

"I've gotten that impression. I don't want to lose troopers to make holders feel better."

"No, sir. You shouldn't." Those words were said firmly.

Compared to the High Holders of Bovaria, the Khellan High Council seemed to show the height of reasonableness, Quaeryt reflected. He rode silently, still trying to think of another strategy that would not risk troopers and imagers, given what they faced. He hadn't thought of one by the time first company rejoined the regiment.

"I take it that the noble High Holder Chaelaet was not present?" asked Skarpa when Quaeryt rejoined him.

"He left an assistant steward to tell me…" Quaeryt explained what had happened.

When Quaeryt finished, Skarpa nodded, a gesture that was both

resigned and accepting. “It won’t be this easy the next time.”

“It might not be that hard with High Holder Duravyt on Vendrei. He may not have word by then.”

“He will. We’re probably being watched right now.”

“You’re likely right. But he won’t have much time to set a trap in the hold, and he won’t want to destroy his own hold or keep. After that … the possibilities are even worse,” replied Quaeryt dryly. *And that will mean that we’ll have to be even nastier.* Still … what else could they do? Requests from Bhayar hadn’t resulted in pledges of allegiance. Politeness hadn’t worked. Nor had a show of force.

“If the others are as stubborn as Chaelaet, all of their holds may have to be reduced or destroyed.” Skarpa looked to Quaeryt, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

“I don’t see any alternatives-not that won’t take tens of regiments and longer than it took to get full allegiance in Tilbor. Do you?”

Skarpa shook his head. “They’ve been allowed to be too independent for too long. Rex Kharst was too indulgent.”

And that was the pity of it all. The southern High Holders-and perhaps others far from Variana-wouldn’t respect anything that was a reasonable overture, and anything that they would respect was far from reasonable.

But hasn’t it always been that way with those who have held too much power or wealth for too long? He eased his mount back beside Vaelora.

“You didn’t have any choice…” she murmured in a low voice.

He did not look back in the direction of the gray column dominating the flattened hilltop as they rode back toward Geusyn.

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On Meredi morning Quaeryt readied himself to take first company, as well as Alazyn's Nineteenth Regiment, back out to Laetor. Once on the road below the leveled hold, he and the undercaptains would begin clearing, smoothing, and improving the narrow track that led to the next nearest hold, because he wanted to clear the road as much as possible before Jeudi, especially since there was no way to meet with High Holder Duravyt on Jeudi without covering much of the distance from Geusyn the day before.

Vaelora had started to dress when Quaeryt shook his head. "You'll be coming with Skarpa and his two regiments later today. We talked about that last night, remember? You said you were tired."

"That was last night."

Quaeryt still thought she looked tired, but saying that would only stiffen her resolve. So he waited as she continued.

"You talked about leaving early. I don't remember you saying anything about my being escorted by Skarpa."

"I thought that was clear."

"Clear? How?"

"Because we're a working party, merely improving the roads for you. You're Lord Bhayar's sister and the most important envoy. Having you with me sooner than necessary for a member of the ruling family would undermine your status in the eyes of the High Holders … and of the Autarch."

"Merely improving the roads?" replied Vaelora with a light sardonic tone. "And what, exactly, does the Autarch have to do with it?"

"You'll need every evidence of stature when we have to treat with him."

"*If* we have to treat with him, and that's unlikely, dearest."

"You think so?"

"I do … one way or the other."

"I would strongly prefer that you rest this morning and come with Skarpa," Quaeryt said gently.

"Since you are expressing a preference … and not commanding, dearest…" Vaelora paused meaningfully before concluding, "I will rest this morning."

"Thank you." Quaeryt tried not to sigh in relief.

"You're sweet when you're concerned," she added, "especially when you stop trying to order me around." She smiled, an expression both pleased, yet appreciative. "Not that you do all that often. But still…"

Bhayar said that she could be difficult. He'd also mentioned something about Quaeryt being difficult and the two of them deserving each other.

"I'm glad you're taking a full regiment."

He looked at her quizzically.

"If the undercaptains have to clear that much road, they'll be tired by the end of the day. So will you. You might think about sending a company ahead of the clearing … if you haven't already."

"Farsight … or prudence?" he asked.

"Prudence. You know that the only farsight flash I've had since we left Variana doesn't make much sense."

"Do you want to tell me?"

"You know how I feel about that." She shook her head. "Besides, I don't think it reflects something about to happen soon."

"Like when you saw yourself entering the Telaryn Palace years before it happened?"

"You like the thought that we were destined to be together." Vaelora smiled. "You know, the idea of destiny is a bit of a conflict for a man who doesn't believe in the Nameless. How can there be destiny without some force creating it?"

"Maybe there is a force, just not the Nameless or the Namer."

"Then … it's still a Nameless force."

Quaeryt couldn't argue that. "I need to be moving."

She raised an eyebrow.

He flushed, then shook his head. "I'll see you this afternoon. Skarpa is planning to ride out just before noon."

"I'll be ready."

Quaeryt stepped forward and put his arms around Vaelora, conscious as he only had been recently of the physical reminder that they would be parents. He embraced her gently, kissed her, and stepped back, taking a long look at her before turning and leaving the chamber.

Less than a glass later, wearing his winter jacket, if full open, he was riding near the front of the column headed eastward once more, with Alazyn on one side of him and Zhelan on the other. With the comparative smoothness of the imager-improved road, the ride to the gateposts that marked Laetor was far easier than it would have been otherwise, and it was only slightly after eighth glass when they reined up. Quaeryt glanced toward the gray stone column. It did look ominous against the high gray clouds that he hoped did not foreshadow a cold winter rain.

"Commander…?" asked Alazyn, his voice low but firm.

"Yes?"

"Begging your pardon, sir. I know you've explained that we need

to clear and widen these roads, but…"

"Why now when, if we have to destroy more holds, there won't be any holdings left?"

Alazyn nodded.

"Because there aren't enough imagers to be everywhere. Once we leave, regular troopers can use the roads as necessary with less fear of ambush. Also, it will allow the locals to travel and trade more. The more they do that, the sooner Bovaria and Telaryn will be truly united." *You hope.* "That will, I trust, limit the years and years of skirmishes and rebellion that occurred in both Khel and Tilbora."

"Do you think…?"

"That it will be that easy?" Quaeryt snorted. "Hardly. But anything we can do now that makes things easier for those who are helpful in uniting Lydar and harder on those who aren't will cost us fewer lives in the future. Especially if we can do it without many casualties."

"I can see that," said Alazyn.

"Before we begin with the imagers, I'd like a company sent out to hold a position a half mille or so ahead of us. The imagers will be concentrating on the road, and I don't want them surprised. The troopers aren't to stand and fight anyone who attacks. If that happens, they're to withdraw and let the imager undercaptains move forward to deal with the attackers … or at least widen the fighting area so that the attackers can't dart back in and out of the trees and entice our troopers into that sort of skirmish."

As the black-haired subcommander rode back to instruct the regiment, Quaeryt studied the road ahead. There were more southern pines in the woods flanking the narrow road than there had been nearer the river, but the vast majority of the trees looked to be hardwoods that had lost their leaves, and that might make surprise attacks easier to spot. *You hope.*

As Quaeryt had expected, the imagers were largely rested, and by half past the first glass of the afternoon, they had cleared and smoothed the road a good three milles past the village that had served High Holder Chaelaet. Thin plumes of smoke rose perhaps two or three milles farther west, possibly from a village where they could spend the night, before resuming their efforts on Jeudi. That would require less effort on Jeudi, allowing the imagers more rest before possibly having to deal with High Holder Duravyt on Vendrei.

Then, just as Quaeryt was congratulating himself, a pair of riders galloped toward the imager undercaptains and first company.

"Hold on the imaging!" Quaeryt ordered Lhandor and Horan, who had been about to clear the next section of woods flanking the road and then to smooth and strengthen the roadbed.

"Sir! Raiders in the woods. Captain Brehalt is falling back as ordered."

Quaeryt, wincing inside, turned. "Undercaptains Voltyr and Threkhyl! Forward!" He turned to Alazyn, who had ridden up to join him when he'd seen the riders. "Which battalion?"

"Second. They're standing by."

"Undercaptains, you're to accompany second battalion, Major Vhessyn commanding."

"Yes, sir!"

"Second battalion! Forward!"

Even before Brehalt's company was within three hundred yards, second battalion met and swept around them on the narrow road.

Quaeryt and Alazyn waited for the captain to report.

When he reined up, Quaeryt nodded to the subcommander.

"What happened?" asked Alazyn.

"Arrows from the woods. We never saw more than a handful of them, but they must have loosed five score arrows," replied Brehalt. "Most missed. We've got three wounded. Don't look to be serious. Even without your orders, going into the woods would have cost us more men, and likely wouldn't have got many of them."

"Good thinking," said Alazyn.

Quaeryt nodded, but he wondered how many more attacks there might be as he looked down the narrow and winding road to the east.

Waiting won't get any imaging done. He cleared his throat. "Undercaptains Lhandor, Horan, stand by to resume imaging."

Less than half a glass later, with another quint of a mille clear and smoothed, and the regiment moved forward, second battalion returned.

Voltyr and the major reined up before Quaeryt and Alazyn.

"Sir," reported Voltyr, "by the time we reached where the ambush took place, the attackers were gone." He nodded to Vhessyn.

"We followed some tracks, but there were only a score," added the major. "They rode southeast along a path narrower than this road."

Southeast? The attackers might have come from Duravyt's hold … or from one farther south and east. Quaeryt couldn't immediately remember whose high holding that might be.

Although only three men had been wounded in the initial attack, none seriously, Quaeryt decided to change tactics. He turned in the saddle toward Alazyn. "You've had experience in dealing with these kinds of attacks, I suspect. What would you recommend?"

"I'd place the scouts a few hundred yards out, in plain view, set your imagers in the middle of the road just at the edge of the widened sections, with a company flanking them on each side."

That was similar to what Quaeryt had done on the way to Laetor, but he merely nodded. “Thank you. That’s the way we’ll do it from now on. If you’d assign your troopers…”

“Yes, sir.”

“Undercaptains … stand by while the regiment re-forms.”

In little more than a quint, the road imaging had resumed.

Even by the two quints past the fourth glass of the afternoon, when a trooper messenger reached Quaeryt with word that Skarpa and his regiments-and Vaelora-would reach them in less than a glass, Quaeryt and Alazyn had seen no sign of more attackers, and the village that he had glimpsed earlier in the day was in sight, less than half a mille away.

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Jeudi followed the same pattern as Mardi had, with two more quick attacks on the regiments, although the imagers saw some of the attackers through the trees and brought them down with iron darts. Following that greater success in dealing with the attackers, after which the troopers found eight dead men wearing gray and black uniforms, there were no other attempts on the three regiments, and by Jeudi night Skarpa had all the regiments and the imagers bivouacked in the village less than a mille from Duravyt's high holding, a holding seemingly without activity.

Quaeryt and Vaelora shared a very small hut with Skarpa. All three were more than ready to depart on Vendrei morning-as expressed by Vaelora's parting comment as she looked back at the village from the saddle of her gelding. "There's much written about the pleasures of the simple life, but most of it was written by those who have not experienced it."

Skarpa rode toward Quaeryt and Vaelora, reining up beside them.

"The scouts report that they've still seen no one near Duravyt's hold, but there are tracks and deep ruts in the road beyond the gateposts and heading east. I've sent a company to follow them and report back what they find."

Clearing the last half mille to the hold gates was far easier than previous stretches, since there was only low brush flanking the road proper, as if Duravyt had kept the trees away from the road near the hold. Even so, when the column halted short of the two stone gateposts, the holding surprised Quaeryt, because it was far more like that of other High Holders, a small limestone palace of some age set on the top of a low rise with gardens around it, and only a low stone wall circling the bottom of the rise. The lane leading up to it was paved, and lined with trimmed evergreens of some sort. The gateposts held worked iron gates, gates that were open.

"There's no smoke at all from the chimneys," said Vaelora. "No one's there."

"Duravyt got word about what happened to Chaelaet. That's clear," said Skarpa.

"But why wouldn't he even meet with us?" asked Vaelora.

"He didn't trust Kharst," replied Quaeryt. "For that, I don't blame him, but he's avoided meeting with anyone representing Bhayar, and he's refused to reply to any written dispatches."

"He also avoided me when I rode out here," added Skarpa.

"There must be some other reason," suggested Vaelora.

Quaeryt had ideas about that, but no proof, only suspicions.

“We’ll find out, sooner or later.”

“Either way, we won’t like it,” said Skarpa. “How do you want to handle this? The same way as with Chaelaet?”

“We might as well.”

So Quaeryt and first company, with imagers at the ready, and carrying full shields, rode through the stone gates and up the gently sloping land toward the hold house. The only sounds were those of the riders and their mounts, the loudest of which was hooves on the stone paving. When they reined up short of the main entry, Quaeryt saw that while the windows were closed, they were not shuttered. He turned to Zhelan. “If you’d send a trooper to knock on the door.”

Zhelan relayed the command, and a trooper dismounted and walked toward the door.

Just out of caution, Quaeryt extended shields to cover the man. The trooper knocked. There was no response. After several moments Quaeryt called out, “Try the door.”

The trooper did, with no result.

“Stand back!” Quaeryt ordered.

When the trooper did, Quaeryt imaged away the door, then asked, “Is there anyone there?”

“Sir … it looks like the entire place is empty. I don’t see anything at all.”

“Stand by.” Quaeryt turned. “Undercaptain Khalis, Voltyr … you’re to make a quick inspection. Hold shields at all times.” He looked to Zhelan. “Five troopers to accompany them, if you would.”

“Yes, sir.”

Less than a quint later, Voltyr, Khalis, and the others returned.

Voltyr walked back to where Quaeryt had remained mounted, watching for a possible ambush or attack.

“Sir … everything of value has been removed. They left older furniture and common items in the servants’ quarters, but little else.”

Quaeryt nodded. “Thank you. Mount up. We’ll ride back down the lane a ways before we level the dwelling. Then we’ll inspect the outbuildings before we reduce them.”

All in all, it took less than a glass to level all the structures, all essentially empty.

As Quaeryt rode back to the gates, following the imagers and first company, he realized that to remove everything from such a hold on short notice required significant resources. *A great number of men, mounts, horses, and wagons. Did the other local High Holders assist Duravyt … or does he possess that capability himself?*

When he returned to Skarpa and Vaelora, he gave a quick explanation.

“We might as well push on,” replied Skarpa. “If we don’t give

Wheltar notice, we *might* find him in his hold."

"The way matters are going, I have my doubts," said Quaeryt.

"I said *might,* Quaeryt." Skarpa looked at the level top of the rise.

Quaeryt had refrained from creating another column.

"Almost a shame to destroy the hold," added Skarpa.

"We can't play favorites, and there's no point in leaving them some place where they can return without a high cost." Even as he realized the necessity, Quaeryt hated the fact that he'd destroyed such a well-kept structure. *Yet … what else can you do once you've started?*

"If this keeps up," Skarpa added, "the only thing we'll have for this whole campaign is some very angry High Holders and some very good roads for the locals."

"And for Bhayar's troops and tariff collectors, since it appears likely he'll end up owning all these lands … at least for a time."

"Maybe he should give some of them to Myskyl," quipped Skarpa.

"In time"-*after we deal with Aliaro*-"that might not be a bad idea." Quaeryt glanced toward Vaelora, who had said nothing. She was still looking at the empty low hilltop. While he wondered what she was thinking, he did not ask. Belatedly, he realized that she had never actually seen the imagers create such destruction. She'd only seen the results after the fact.

The regiments had just covered a few hundred yards from the hold gates when Quaeryt and Skarpa saw the company sent to scout the road returning. Skarpa called a halt, and they waited for the company officer to rein up and report.

"What did you discover, Captain?" asked Skarpa.

"The wagons and the riders from here only rode a half mille east. Then they took another road south, sir. It looks to head for the gap in the hills there. The part of the east road leading to the south road is a good road. The road south is even better and much wider…"

Leading right through the Lohan Hills into Antiago.

"They must have had more than a score of wagons, and there are tracks headed both ways. Some of the wheel ruts on the shoulder are shallower. I'd guess that they must have made several trips carrying things. The border is only about two milles south of the east road. At least, there are posts there with an 'A' cut into them. The road looks even better on the other side. We didn't ride past the pillars, sir."

"Good. Anything else?" asked Skarpa.

"No, sir. We didn't see anyone. No guards or sentries."

That observation chilled Quaeryt more than anything else.

"Thank you, Captain. You and your men may return to your battalion."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Thank you."

After the captain had eased his mount away, Vaelora urged her mount forward, closer to Quaeryt and Skarpa. “So they retreated into Antiago. What do you think that means?” Her quick glance at Quaeryt suggested she had a point beyond the obvious with the question.

“That they know they’re welcome there,” said Skarpa. “Or that Aliaro can’t do anything to them. Either way…” He paused. “But why? Kharst wasn’t pressing them that much.”

“Maybe he was, and maybe he couldn’t do much with everything else facing him,” replied Quaeryt.

“Maybe he wasn’t that good a ruler,” suggested Vaelora.

“I think we’ve already established that,” replied Quaeryt. “In a way, it all makes sense. There’s really no other place to trade or to obtain goods.”

“What about Ephra?” Skarpa frowned.

“You haven’t seen the place. It’s almost fifteen milles from there to the river, and two milles across and downstream. They’d have to pay to get goods carried to and from the port … and Geusyn doesn’t offer that much for trading. If Aliaro offers the High Holders some sort of accommodation, they can trade with the towns just south of the hills. They provide a buffer against Kharst … and Aliaro can always deny that he knew anything about it.”

“So they’re really Aliaro’s High Holders as much as Bovaria’s?” prompted Vaelora.

“More, from what I’ve seen,” rejoined Skarpa gruffly. “Well … we might as well push on and see what we find at Wheltar’s holding.”

Quaeryt suspected they all knew what they’d find … or what they wouldn’t. But they needed to prove that before he, Skarpa, and Vaelora could decide on their next steps.

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Over the next week, the imagers widened roads and visited three more empty high holdings. At each holding, there were tracks and traces heading south. Quaeryt and the imagers leveled them all. When they finally returned to Geusyn, with the regiments, it was more than a week later, and Skarpa, Vaelora, and Quaeryt met once more in the small plaques room in the River Inn after dinner on Vendrei evening.

"We're almost a week into Fevier, and we're in no better position than we were a month ago. You and the imagers have destroyed five high holdings, but gained little in golds and no allegiance." Skarpa took a deep breath and then a swallow of the beaker of lager before him. "Except we can't do anything more because they've all crossed the border into Antiago. Every last one of them."

"Perhaps it's time we went into Antiago," suggested Quaeryt.

"I'd ask if you're serious, except I'm afraid you'll tell me you are."

"I am. We could send dispatches to Aliaro, but he'd just reply politely and say that he doesn't have any control over Bovarian High Holders and if they choose to visit lovely Antiago, he certainly can't stop them."

"Deucalon will claim the Autarch hasn't done anything against us," Skarpa pointed out.

"Oh … he hasn't. Outside of sending troopers and Antiagon Fire against us in support of Kharst. Or attacking Telaryn ships in the open Gulf. Or harboring five High Holders who failed to pay tariffs to either Kharst or Bhayar," replied Quaeryt, "and who not only failed to pledge allegiance to Bhayar, but fled rather than do so."

"He'll claim that we didn't ask Aliaro for their return."

"He probably will," admitted Quaeryt. "But Aliaro will delay answering and then admit to nothing while readying his defenses, his imagers, and his Antiagon Fire. He might even make noise about the fact that Bhayar can't even control his own High Holders. Bhayar wants control over both Antiago and Khel, and he can't get Khel unless he takes Antiago. The longer he waits, the more men and time it will cost. And Aliaro has already raised arms and ships against us when we did nothing against him."

"You're intent on invading Antiago, aren't you?"

"How many troopers did we lose and how many did Deucalon lose by following Myskyl's advice?"

"Thousands," admitted Skarpa.

"If we're successful, is Bhayar going to give Antiago back to Aliaro?" asked Quaeryt.

"After the way Aliaro treated our sister?" added Vaelora

sardonically.

"And if we're not successful?"

"Doing nothing but sitting and waiting will be considered failure. Is there an alternative with Deucalon and Myskyl waiting for us to fail?"

"If we succeed, Khel will have to agree to terms," said Skarpa slowly. "We either succeed mightily … or fail grandly."

"Do we really have another choice?" *Given who we are?*

"How do you plan to attack Antiago?"

"Quickly … and without warning. There are only five major cities, and that's if we count Kephria, which might not even be a large town. We take them, except for Westisle, which we can't because it's on an island … and take Aliaro … and try to make people understand that we're not out to destroy them personally."

"That's…" Skarpa shook his head.

"Harder than it sounds," Quaeryt admitted. "And I could be wrong." *And you often are.* "But I can't believe Aliaro's liked all that well."

"Few rulers are. Don't you think the Khellans would agree to terms anyway?" asked Skarpa.

"In a generation or so when the land is overrun with opportunists and shady merchants … except it won't go on that long, because the merchants and traders will all be petitioning Bhayar to do something because the Pharsi will be either driving them out by better trading or removing them by quiet force."

"What about Khaern and the rest of Eleventh Regiment? How soon do you expect them to return?"

"It could be within the week. It could be two weeks. It depends on the winds and the sea state."

"When do you want to start this assault? Tomorrow?" asked Skarpa dryly.

"I was thinking about Solayi morning. No one attacks on Solayi. Since Aliaro won't be expecting anything so soon…"

"You think we can take Kephra more easily."

"That's the hope." Quaeryt frankly harbored the thought that they might not encounter serious resistance until they neared Liantiago. *You're assuming that you can even get that far with seven regiments against an entire land.*

"You realize that we're likely doomed if we don't succeed," Skarpa pointed out.

"We're likely doomed if we do nothing," replied Quaeryt. "That doom will just happen more slowly."

"Would you take your two regiments alone into Antiago?"

"I'll take all that I can, if I have to," replied Quaeryt. "I am

missing half a regiment and Calkoran's battalion at the moment."

"Why?"

"Because right now is the only chance we'll have to do it right."

"You can't invade another country without killing thousands."

"Exactly," replied Quaeryt. "If we don't invade Antiago now, someone will have to invade Khel and Antiago in the next ten years, and each invasion will cost more than our doing it now."

"You don't think the three lands could live in peace?"

"They never have. Even when they were supposedly at peace, there were raids and skirmishes. Every time one land has been markedly stronger than another, there was an invasion and a consolidation. It's going to take place. The only question is when and how many lives it costs. You and Meinyt told me that one of the biggest dangers for a commander was waiting too long." *You're twisting that a bit, but …*

"Meinyt's always believed that."

"Do you disagree?"

"I don't disagree with his point, but we haven't been given orders to invade Antiago."

"No … but we have been given orders to obtain the allegiance of the High Holders, and we can't even get a hold of them without invading Antiago. So we fail if we do nothing, and if we're to succeed we end up invading Antiago one way or the other."

"And…" Skarpa paused before adding, "You can't get Khel to agree to terms without Bhayar having control over Antiago. So we're both frigging screwed unless we start another war … and win it."

"That's the way I see it. What about you?"

Skarpa shook his head. "I'd like to find Deucalon in a dark alley and put a blade up under his ribs, but then we'd have to deal with Myskyl, and that wouldn't be any better."

"Worse, more likely."

Skarpa abruptly turned to Vaelora. "Lady … you've been quiet. You're Bhayar's sister and an envoy. What do you think?"

Vaelora offered a sad smile, but did not speak.

Both men waited.

Finally, she spoke. "I think that if you do your best the war will be short and bloody. If you try to be kind and merciful in battle, it will be long and bloody, and more will die."

"You sound like your father," said Skarpa.

"How could I not? I've heard what he saw. I've seen what Quaeryt has done, and how worrying about what people think always makes things worse."

Skarpa looked to Quaeryt. "The plaques are red. How do you want to proceed?"

"I'd like to scout the wall early tomorrow and meet with you when I get back. I don't think we should tell any of the regimental commanders much beyond the fact that we expect heavy fighting on Lundi. It's not as though we've got any way to scout Kephria, and even if we sent a spy…"

"It wouldn't do much good."

Quaeryt shook his head. *Not when you plan to bring down the wall.*

"Then I'll see you in the morning. I need to think about a few things." Skarpa paused. "I imagine you do, too." He looked to Vaelora.

She took the hint and rose from her chair. "We all do, Commander. I appreciate your thoughtful questions, and my brother will appreciate all the concerns about what is in his best interests."

"Rulers don't usually appreciate much besides success," said Skarpa as he and Quaeryt stood.

"That's why you and Quaeryt will do what you must, and why I will support and aid you both as I can."

Skarpa nodded. "Thank you, Lady."

Neither Quaeryt nor Vaelora spoke more until they had returned to their chamber.

Once Quaeryt had closed the door and slid the bolt, Vaelora looked at him. "What are you thinking this very moment, dearest?"

"About the entire future of Lydar being decided in the smallest plaques room in an old inn in a run-down town on the Laar River." He shook his head. "What about you?"

"I'm angry with the High Council of Khel. They're being stupid and shortsighted, and they should know better. I don't expect more from Aliaro."

"Especially after the way he treated Chaerila?"

"She was so sweet, and when she died giving birth to his child … and he remarried in less than a season and only sent a curt dispatch." She shook her head. "Khel is too weak to hold out."

"Was I too hard on Skarpa?"

"It's something you two had to talk out."

"He trusts you. That's clear."

"That's because he's a good judge of character." Vaelora smiled, briefly.

"How do you think this campaign will go?"

"No matter what you do, it will be bloody. All wars are. The shorter the fighting is, the fewer people who will die."

"And the more decisive and brutal the imagers and I will have to be."

She nodded again. "But over the years fewer will die, and others will be happier. If you survive. You must survive, or all will be for naught."

"Another farsight?"

"No … just an understanding of what must be."

Quaeryt walked to the window, as if to look out, before realizing that the inner shutters were still closed.

"It's dark. There's nothing to see," Vaelora said gently, walking toward the narrow table that served as a desk. "For all your words … you're worried."

"More than worried. I *know* that taking over Antiago will be for the best for everyone in the long run. People don't think that way."

"Dearest … remember what I said about Bhayar not being successful without you? This is one of those times. If he makes the decision to invade, everyone will know. It will take longer and cost more lives. If you do it…"

"Then he can claim brilliance if it works and blame us if it doesn't."

"You don't need to keep going over it and over it tonight."

"What would you suggest I do?"

"First … remember to lay out your uniforms so that I can have them all washed and fullered tomorrow."

"All of them?"

"You know what I mean." Vaelora then offered an impish smile that he knew was forced as she stepped away from the table toward him. "Read this, if you would, dearest?" She extended the copy of *Rholan and the Nameless*. "It might take your mind off what lies ahead."

Quaeryt wasn't certain that anything would, but he took the book. "It's too dark to read."

"You could light the lamp on the table."

He did by imaging it into flame, then sat on the straight-backed chair and began to read at the place where Vaelora's finger pointed.

Among the many conflicting stories about Rholan's death was that of the man in gray who sought him on the days before he disappeared, and since the assassins of Estisle always wore gray, many speculated that young Hengyst had dispatched one. It is not beyond the pale to entertain that notion, but Rholan had enemies other than Hengyst, and most were far closer … including High Holder Doulyn of Douvyt, who had wed his half brother's widow, and who had forbid her to ever meet with Rholan. While there is no record of the two meeting, there were rumors for years, although those died away quickly when Doulyn died of "bad food" less than a month after Rholan's disappearance, especially when her only son by Doulyn became High Holder of Douvyt.

When he finished, Quaeryt looked up quizzically. "Why this passage?"

“Don’t you think it’s rather odd?”

“What?”

Vaelora offered an exasperated sigh. “Rholan’s death, her being forbidden to meet with him, and then Doulyn’s death.”

“You don’t think Doulyn’s death was an accident at all, do you?”

“Of course not. That’s not the point. The writer never mentions Thierysa’s name here, but she’s mentioned elsewhere. Doesn’t some of what’s written here seem strange?”

“Right now, everything seems strange.” He closed the book and handed it back to her. “I suppose all times are strange to those trying to change them. Rholan was successful in changing some things … and no one really knows who he was. Except for those long dead or the few that read this book.”

“I wonder if she loved him.”

“She didn’t marry him.”

“She couldn’t. Not without destroying her family. I’m fortunate.”

“I’m not so certain,” Quaeryt said slowly. “She couldn’t marry, even if she had wanted to, and we don’t know whether she did. You had to marry me so that I can make your brother ruler of all Lydar. Both of you had no choice.”

“But I discovered I could love you. She didn’t love Doulyn. Just the way the book is written makes that clear.”

“Then we’re both fortunate.” Quaeryt stood.

“We are.” Vaelora wrapped her arms around him, holding him close.

Quaeryt tried just to concentrate on her.

51

Two quints past seventh glass on Samedi morning, Quaeryt, Zhelan, the imager undercaptains-excepting Desyrk and Smaelthyl, who still remained with Meinyt in Laaryn-and a company from Nineteenth Regiment, led by Captain Maasn, reined up on the rutted and now disused section of road that had once led to Kephria, some two hundred yards north of the massive stone wall that ran from the rugged hills more than a mille east of the river, right to the edge of the water. Where the land wall and the shore wall met was a low square tower. The river's waters lapped against the section of that sheer gray stone wall that ran a good half mille downstream from the tower before turning westward, where it extended some fifty yards out into the water, ending with a larger square stone tower that rose another five yards above the wall. For all its considerable length the top of the stone wall was uniformly ten yards above the road or the water. There were no gates or breaks in the stone, none that Quaeryt could see, at least.

As before, Quaeryt saw no sentries. He glanced from the wall to the chest-high brush between the road and the water at the odd assortment of buildings and roofs to the south on the far side of the river. Ephra still looked like a poor location for a port, and not a single ship was visible in its harbor. Even the piers used by the ferries returning to Geusyn were empty, although, Quaeryt supposed, that was to be expected in late morning.

Quaeryt turned to Zhelan. "Your thoughts, Major?"

"If you want quick passage, it'd be best if the imagers could topple the wall into the river. Be the Namer's time getting over all the fallen stone otherwise. Unless you have the imagers smooth the way through the middle of the city."

"There aren't any dwellings or buildings on the higher parts of those hills to the east," mused Quaeryt. "Usually folks with golds like the hills. Then again, this close to the border, I'd guess that they live farther south." On the other hand, he'd also never heard of a wall stopping trade, and that suggested the heavy forest to the east concealed a myriad of narrow roads or trails that wound back through the hills. Given the modest level of prosperity in Geusyn, that trade had to run both ways, suggesting that the wall had never been built to stop trade, but to make the cost of acquiring Kephria higher than any Bovarian rex wanted to incur.

"The scouts never see anyone on the walls. Can't believe that Kephria's that busy a port."

"It's likely not. The autarchs built it to keep the city from falling

into Bovarian hands."

"When was it built, sir?"

"No one seems to know exactly, but one of the autarchs built it sometime early in the rule of Rex Haarl, Kharst's father. That may have been why Haarl built the Great Canal. Or maybe Aliaro's sire put up the wall to block access to Kephria after the Great Canal was built."

"So they traded for centuries through Kephria … and then the Autarch built the wall? Why didn't Kharst or his father just stop it or take it down?"

"That's a good question. We likely won't ever know why, but I'd guess by the time they learned about the wall, it was largely built, and they felt it wasn't worth fighting a war over, especially in a place so hard to get an army to and so far from Variana."

"Could it be that Kharst's sire didn't want his troopers that far from Variana?" asked Voltyr, who had eased his mount forward on Quaeryt's left.

"That's very possible." Quaeryt looked past Zhelan to Maasn, reined up on Zhelan's left. "Captain … if you'd send a squad east along the wall-as far as where it meets that rocky outcropping. We need to know if there are any breaks or gates in the wall-or anything unusual."

"Yes, sir." Maasn nodded and turned his mount.

While the captain moved off to give instructions to the patrol squad, Quaeryt turned to Voltyr. "What do you think about how to remove or breach the wall?"

"It might take less effort to rearrange the stone, rather than remove it," suggested Voltyr.

Rearrange? Then Quaeryt nodded. "That would also make our progress southward even faster."

"You ought to have Threkhyl begin the imaging," Voltyr went on. "He's the strongest, besides you, at that. You want the Antiagons to be shocked and stunned."

Quaeryt nodded, then watched as a squad moved away from Maasn's company, heading eastward along a path that might have once been a lane, or a game trail. Then he turned his mare so that he faced the undercaptains and motioned for the others to ride forward and join him.

"I'd like all of you to study that wall. We may have to remove a large section of it and use the stone to pave a causeway through the city beyond."

"May?" asked Threkhyl.

"If it appears that the Bovarian High Holders won't pledge allegiance and intend to remain in Antiago, the only way to secure the

border will likely require our taking Kephria. The submarshal is considering that possibility. He wanted to know if we could open the wall. That's why we're here."

"We can do it, sir," replied Threkhyl. "We've done more than that."

"I know you can, but I'd like you to do it with the least effort possible. When we first encountered earthworks, you asked if you could just move the earth, and it turned out that was less effort. I thought that you might be able to do the same with the stone."

"You mean just pile it aside somewhere?"

"Actually," said Quaeryt with a smile, "you all have noticed how poor the roads happen to be here. I was thinking that we might just turn the wall into a stone-paved way right through Kephria…"

A wide grin crossed the face of Khalis, the youngest undercaptain.

Threkhyl frowned, then nodded. "Yes, sir. It'd be easier that way."

"If we remove part of the wall, sir," asked Voltyr, "how wide an opening do you want?"

"We'll start with a hundred yards, and then see what's on the other side."

"What about the Antiagons?" asked Horan.

"We won't be leading the assault, but we'll try to avoid hurting people who aren't troopers."

Quaeryt answered questions for a time after that, then filled the other imagers in on what he knew about Antiago and the Autarch, including the way Aliaro had dealt with Bhayar's sister Chaerila. After almost a glass, when Maasn's squad rode back and reined up, Quaeryt urged the mare forward to talk to the squad leader.

"What did you find out?" asked Quaeryt.

"There's nothing different there, sir. Just trees and the wall. We didn't see any gaps, no tunnels, and no gates. There aren't any embrasures in the wall, either."

"Did you see any sentries?"

"No, sir. There are small towers every fifth of a mille. Sentries might be inside, I'd guess. No way to measure exactly, but there are six from here to the end of the wall. That doesn't count the one there at the corner."

"How thick is the undergrowth?"

"It runs right up to the stone. Trees have been cut back now and again, looks like, for maybe twenty yards back from the wall."

So they won't overtop the wall itself.

Quaeryt asked questions for almost another quint, but learned little more. Finally, he ordered the group back to Geusyn. He reined up in the courtyard of the River Inn at two quints past the first glass of the afternoon, but had to wait until almost second glass before Skarpa

returned and they met in the large plaques room.

"What did you find out?" asked Skarpa.

"It's a big wall." Quaeryt smiled sardonically. "It's a waste of good stone. Kharst and Aliaro could have paved a road for milles with all that stone and split the tariffs from Kephria. They both would have come out ahead, and Kharst and his sire wouldn't have had to pour golds into that swamp they call Ephra."

Skarpa frowned. "You're thinking of paving…? Oh … Do you think that will work?"

"Voltyr suggested it, in a way. It can't hurt to try."

"I've set a meeting with the regimental commanders for third glass. They should know," said Skarpa. "They can keep it to themselves. Especially if you point out to them that if word leaks out, hundreds more troopers and officers might die."

"I worry about that … but you're right." Quaeryt paused. "Have you received any dispatches from Bhayar or Deucalon?"

"One. Just before you returned from Khel. From Deucalon, requesting that I keep him informed of our progress. I sent back a brief missive that said we were progressing as expected and that you had not returned from Khel."

"You're under Bhayar's direct command…"

"There's no point in upsetting a marshal when you don't have to," said Skarpa mildly.

"You're right." *And Deucalon can get upset about such things easily.*

"There's one other matter," said Skarpa. "We've never discussed battlefield succession…"

Quaeryt looked at Skarpa. "You're in command. Why are you bringing that up now? Are you worried about something we haven't talked about?"

"Anytime you fight, you can run into trouble. Everyone knows that, if something happens to me-it could, you know-then you're in command."

"And if something happens to us both, Kharllon is next in line."

"And after him?"

"If it comes to that … it's not our problem," Quaeryt rejoined dryly.

"That may be. But, just because we've never talked about it, the seniority is, in order, Paedn, Dulaek, Meurn, Fhaen, and Fhaasn." Skarpa nodded firmly. "We'll just tell them we're going to attack Kephria and why. Then we'll explain the plan…"

Quaeryt listened, occasionally making suggestions.

After he and Skarpa finished going over the agenda for the meeting with the regimental commanders at third glass, Quaeryt retreated to his and Vaelora's room, where she was seated at the desk,

writing.

"You're back?" she asked, looking up.

"For a few quints, until we meet with the regimental commanders. Who are you writing?"

"Aelina. It's been a while. Don't worry. I'm not saying anything except where we are, and that can't be any secret." She paused. "You look worried."

"Skarpa insisted on going over the seniority … as if something might happen to him tomorrow or in the weeks ahead. He's never done that before."

"He's never commanded this big an army before, has he?"

"No … but it's not like him. I can't help but worry if it's another way of saying he doesn't like the idea of invading Antiago."

"Do you?"

"No … but it's the least of the evils." Quaeryt fingered his chin, then shook his head. "Everyone will think that it was foolish and unnecessary, and that all those who will have died didn't have to. But the fights and the wars will go on and on until Lydar is unified."

"If it stays unified," Vaelora pointed out.

"It has to. That's one thing the imagers can do for your brother and his son."

"Only if you survive, dearest. No one else can hold them together … and face down Bhayar."

"I think you've made that point before."

"I'll keep making it, too."

"What are you telling Aelina?"

"That I'm healthy, and that Geusyn and southern Bovaria have little to recommend them."

"We agree on that." Quaeryt sat on the end of the bed and glanced toward the unshuttered windows, one of which was open, with a cold breeze flowing from it. "Aren't you cold?"

"No. I get too warm if the window's not open. Aelina told me that might happen. She said I was fortunate not to have to carry a child through the summer. She had to, and she was miserable."

"Especially in Solis."

"It wouldn't be any better here."

Quaeryt could believe that. In thinking about the letter his wife was writing, he also realized that neither he nor Vaelora had received any letters or dispatches … and Skarpa only one of a noncommittal nature. He couldn't help but worry about what might be happening in Variana. *But there's nothing you can do about it.*

All too soon, he gave Vaelora a brief kiss and headed back down to the large plaques chamber, where he waited outside with Skarpa, while all the regimental commanders entered and took their places

around the large circular table.

Then he entered, followed by Skarpa, who remained standing while all the others seated themselves.

"Tomorrow, we're going to take Kephria," Skarpa began.

Quaeryt surveyed the faces of the officers seated around the table. Kharllon revealed nothing, nor did Meurn. Paedn nodded, as did Fhaen. Dulaek frowned, and Fhaasn's brow wrinkled in puzzlement. Alazyn glanced at Quaeryt more than once. He just nodded in return.

"It's simple," Skarpa went on. "We were sent to secure the border with Antiago and to obtain the allegiance of the Bovarian High Holders in the south. All of them have fled into Antiago. When Commander Quaeryt took part of his force to Kherseilles, his ships were attacked by Antiagon warships. While he and his imagers sank three of the five attackers, that was an act of war against Telaryn. So is harboring traitorous High Holders. Previously, the Autarch has attacked Ephra as well. His cannon take aim at any ship nearing Kephria that is not Antiagon. The only way to carry out our orders and secure the border is to take Kephria."

"We don't have cannon or siege engines, sir," said Subcommander Meurn. "Or will we be marching east and swinging behind the wall?"

"Trying to ride or march through those woods would be hard on your men, Subcommander," replied Skarpa. "We'll be leaving the wall to Commander Quaeryt and his men. Once they've opened it, because there may be a fair amount of debris, we'll need a foot regiment to move in first. That will be Fifteenth Regiment…"

Meurn did frown at that, if momentarily, as Skarpa continued putting forth the plan of attack.

Quaeryt just listened and watched the other officers, knowing he'd need to go over details with Alazyn and Zhelan after the meeting, and then with Major Baarl, the senior major from Eleventh Regiment, since the two battalions he was temporarily commanding would be the ones guarding Geusyn-and Vaelora.

52

By seventh glass on Solayi morning, Quaeryt, first company and the imagers, and the three regiments Skarpa had selected from Southern Army were formed up some two hundred yards north of the gray stone wall that separated Kephria from Bovaria. The air was chill, the sky a hazy gray. To the right, and nearest to the River Laar, were Quaeryt and the imagers, with first company drawn up close behind them. In the center of the rutted road was Fifteenth Regiment, with the mounted Sixth Regiment behind them, and Twenty-sixth Regiment farther back.

Skarpa was mounted beside Quaeryt with a squad from Third Regiment to his left and slightly behind him. The remaining three regiments from Southern Army and Nineteenth Regiment were standing by, but on the outskirts of Geusyn.

"There's still no one on the walls," said Skarpa. "And no clamoring or alarms from the south."

"They may not be worried. They can't see cannon or siege engines." *They may not even know that we've used imagers to remove walls. And even if they've heard stories, most people wouldn't believe them.*

"Proceed, Commander," ordered Skarpa, nodding as he issued the order.

"Undercaptain Khalis! Clear the underbrush!" ordered Quaeryt.

"Yes, sir!" The young undercaptain concentrated. A swathe of underbrush more than a hundred yards wide and fifty deep vanished. Instantly, a thin white mist appeared above the ground where the bushes had been.

"Undercaptain Threkhyl! Forward!"

"Sir!"

"Remove the first section of wall."

"Yes, sir."

Barely had the acknowledgment left the undercaptain's mouth when a white flash obscured the gray stone barrier for an instant. When Quaeryt could see, an opening a hundred yards wide, from the ground up, had appeared in the stone. Beyond the middle of the opening was a stretch of gray stone pavement that looked to extend hundreds of yards south, almost to the edge of the harbor.

Quaeryt glanced to Threkhyl, who swayed slightly in his saddle. "Drink some watered lager! Now!"

His eyes went back to the opening in the wall. Beyond where the stone wall had stood was a welter of huts and hovels, through which wound twisted paths. The newly created and paved road had cut through a number of those dwellings, and dust swirled up through the

chill morning air, made even colder by the imaging. Several women were screaming … and people were scrambling out of the ramshackle dwellings and hurrying southward toward the more solid structures around the harbor.

Quaeryt hadn't known what to expect, but he hadn't anticipated what he saw.

But you should have known! Aliaro wouldn't have built the wall right beside good houses. On the other hand, there was no sign of a nearby barracks or post, unless the wall sentries or guards were based in a modest gray stone building set against the shore wall just before the corner where it turned out into the waters of the River Laar.

A horn blared, and the troopers of Fifteenth Regiment moved forward at a trot, blades and bucklers at the ready. Not a single Antiagon armsman moved forward to meet the advancing Telaryn troopers, but the scattered screams grew more numerous as the troopers moved down the stone-paved road through the scattered dwellings and the remaining parts of some huts toward the center of the port town.

"Forward," ordered Skarpa.

"First company! Forward!" repeated Zhelan.

"Imagers! On me!" added Quaeryt.

Skarpa was careful to set the pace so that Fifteenth Regiment continued in advance of him and first company, although that caution seemed scarcely necessary as the inhabitants of the run-down taudis fled willy-nilly.

In less than a quint the Telaryn forces reached the north end of the harbor, which effectively began with the stone wall that extended out into the river. A handful of men in maroon uniforms fled from the gray stone building at the corner of the wall. One ran for the river and jumped into the water. The others began to run toward the center of the town.

"Not exactly brave defenders," noted Skarpa.

"Unless there's a garrison on the south side of Kephria, there may not be any at all," replied Quaeryt, surveying the north end of the harbor.

Against the south side of the river wall was a stone pier, at which were moored several small craft. One of them was filled with water and resting on the river mud. The shoreline angled eastward downstream of the river wall, forming the northern side of the small harbor, but there was no river wall or seawall on the northern end, just a muddy flat stretching southeast, and flanked by a boulevard paved with uneven and cracked stones on which Quaeryt certainly would not have wished to drive a wagon.

"Company halt!" Quaeryt ordered, since Fifteenth Regiment had

also halted.

Several of the buildings bordering the northeast side of harbor were little more than roofless charred structures whose walls had weathered into featureless gray.

Not even rebuilt from the fires set by Kharst's imagers?

Farther south were dwellings and shops that had seen better days, and then the remaining intact warehouses, as well as a row of shops, a chandlery, and possibly an inn or two.

A courier galloped toward Skarpa, reining up. "Sir, Subcommander Meurn requests permission to continue."

"Have him take the city. No one is to be harmed unless they attack or offer resistance."

"Take the city. Harm no one unless they attack or resist. Yes, sir." The squad leader nodded, then turned his mount.

Quaeryt watched for a moment as the foot troopers moved forward, followed by Dulaek's mounted, and then by Fhaasn's foot.

"Did you expect this?" asked Skarpa.

"I didn't think there would be that many defenders. I told you that. I didn't expect that there wouldn't be any … or so few as to amount to none." Quaeryt paused, then added, "The Antiagons have scarcely been using Kephria as a port. That's what it looks like, anyway."

"Waste of a good harbor." The submarshal shook his head. "Doesn't make sense."

"In a way, it does." Quaeryt readjusted his visor cap. Even in the chill of a southern winter, he tended to sweat where the edges of the cap met his head. "The autarchs wanted to keep Bovarian traders and trade out of Kephria. I'm guessing about that, but it's the only thing that makes sense."

"But why?"

"Most ships that likely once ported here were more interested in trading with southern Bovaria. I'd guess the Bovarians built the Great Canal to take advantage of that. Aliaro's father was probably afraid that the Bovarians would take over Kephria, and he didn't want more Bovarians here. So he built the wall to keep them out. The Bovarians couldn't afford a war, or didn't want to send an army that far from Variana. So they built Ephra, and most ships stopped porting here because they couldn't pick up Bovarian cargoes."

"He put up that huge wall to stop traders? How could he have known that Bovaria wouldn't try to tear it down?"

"He didn't. I'd wager that a regiment was probably posted here for at least several years. Long enough to discourage the Bovarians from bringing an army down here."

Skarpa shook his head.

A glass later, another messenger, this one from Dulaek, reported that the port, such as it was, had been secured and that mounted squads from his fourth battalion were patrolling the streets. Shortly, thereafter, Meurn reported that the fort beside the main pier had surrendered.

"We might as well ride down there and see what the fort is like," suggested Skarpa.

Only a handful of men were out, and all of them were graybeards or older, standing on porches or looking from open windows, watching as if they could not believe they were seeing the green uniforms of Telaryn riding through Kephria.

From a closer perspective, under the high thin overcast, Kephria looked even more tired than it had from a distance, everything seeming even grayer and worn. The southernmost pier, the main pier, looked to be the best, constructed of sold gray stone and extending close to five hundred yards out into the river … or the Gulf, since there wasn't a clear demarcation of where one began and the other ended. Not a single craft was moored there, but Quaeryt could see several vessels under sail heading southwest, either out along the Gulf to the open sea or to Liantiago. Neither of the two nearest vessels, from their rigging, looked to be warships.

He reined up and studied the pier. The gray stone was worn, chipped, and stained, clearly weathered and old. The bollards were not only weathered, but the wood appeared wormy and rotten in places. The mooring spaces closer to the shore looked not to have been used in some time, and when Quaeryt looked more closely at the water, he could see why. The water there was less than a yard deep, suggesting that the inner part of the harbor had been silting up for years, if not decades.

Then he turned his attention to the fort, a square stone structure constructed on a raised knoll just south of the main pier. The walls formed three sides of a rectangle, with a small building with a slate roof comprising the rear east wall. The wall facing the river and the Gulf was only some twenty yards long. He couldn't see how many cannon ports there might be, but he doubted there were more than half a score.

"I'm going to ride out on the pier for a moment," he told Skarpa.

"Make it quick. You still could be a target."

Quaeryt did strengthen his shields before he eased the mare down the center of the pier. He only rode out far enough to see the gun ports. At first he thought there were ten, but then he realized that seven of those appeared to be boarded up on the inside, although he wouldn't have been able to tell that if he'd been much farther away. Shaking his head, he turned the mare and rode back to rejoin Skarpa.

“What did you see?”

“From a distance, there are ten ports. Seven are blocked.”

“A sham. Like everything else here.”

“It might not have been once.”

“They just fired at Bovarian ships to keep the Bovarians thinking that they had a large garrison here,” said Skarpa.

“Where are their real troopers?” asked Zhelan.

“They have to have some. We ran into a regiment’s worth of them on the way up the Aluse,” replied Skarpa. “Khaern said they had a regiment northeast of Hassyl.”

“That would make sense. That’s near the border with Telaryn,” said Quaeryt. “Aliaro might be relying on those Bovarian High Holders we chased into Antiago as protection here.”

“But why wouldn’t they have some troopers here?” asked Zhelan. “They built the wall.”

“Troopers cost golds. Antiago isn’t that rich a land.” Quaeryt was surmising from what he’d seen years earlier and from what he’d read. “The Lohan Hills are inhospitable and the southern coast is almost a high rocky desert. The area around Hassyl is fertile, and so are at least some of the lands from east of Suemyran to Liantiago. Most of the wealth comes from the sea, with their traders.”

“They’ll have troopers and Antiagon Fire when we near Suemyran,” predicted Skarpa.

“Not too much nearer, I’d wager,” replied Quaeryt. “Aliaro seems to have neglected this part of the north.”

“Kephria, anyway,” said Skarpa. “Once we’ve got everything settled here, we’ll need to talk to the people before we go any farther.”

Quaeryt couldn’t disagree with that.

53

By late Lundi afternoon, Kephria was firmly in Telaryn hands, and the Telaryn ensign flew from the tower at river end of the breached stone wall. Major Baarl and the half of Eleventh Regiment with Southern Army had taken over the patrolling duties, and Vaelora was installed in the best room in the one decent inn in Kephria, looking over Quaeryt's shoulder as he attempted to draft a dispatch to Bhayar.

"I still worry about leaving you here," he said, pausing for a moment.

"You need as many troopers as possible for what you're doing. I'll be just as safe here as in Geusyn," insisted Vaelora. "And Major Baarl and you don't have to garrison two towns. Besides, it won't be that long before the *Montagne* returns with Subcommander Khaern and the other two battalions of Eleventh Regiment."

Quaeryt did not dispute her logic, but he had misgivings about anything that hadn't yet happened. Anything could delay the return of half of Eleventh Regiment … not to mention Calkoran's understrength battalion. Still … he and the imagers had to accompany Skarpa, especially since the invasion of Antiago had been his idea, and sending Vaelora back to Variana would weaken their forces. In addition, the authority they were using-or misusing-was based on both Quaeryt and Vaelora having power as joint envoys.

Vaelora looked out the inn window, then turned to Quaeryt. "Why is it so run-down?"

"Idiocy," he replied, realizing he hadn't explained to her what he'd already suggested to Skarpa. "Most ships with trade for southern Bovaria likely once ported here. I'd guess the Bovarians built the Great Canal to take advantage of that. Aliaro's father was probably afraid that the Bovarians would take over Kephria, and he built the wall to keep the Bovarians out. The Bovarians didn't want or couldn't afford a war and built Ephra, and most ships stopped porting here because they couldn't pick up Bovarian cargoes."

"It all doesn't make much sense. The autarchs built a wall that ruined the port and then largely neglected the town, and Kharst tried to burn it down, and then Aliaro shelled Ephra?"

Quaeryt offered an ironic smile. "If all goes well, we'll end up restoring Kephria, taking trade from Geusyn, and turning Ephra into a ruin. It should make everyone better off in time."

"People don't like to wait for better times."

"They don't like to pay for them, either." He returned his attention to the document before him. "I need to finish this and have you read it … and make any changes you think necessary before I

show it to Skarpa."

"You think he'll want to sign it?"

"We'll all be blamed if things go ill. If they go well, he might as well get the credit."

"He will get the credit, you know, dearest?"

Quaeryt nodded, then resumed writing. After a time, he laid the pen carefully on the folded paper serving as a pen rest and handed the sheet to Vaelora. "If you would?"

As she took it and began to read, Quaeryt rose and stood behind her, rereading what he had set to paper, concentrating on the paragraph following the flowery salutation and greeting.

… In your wisdom, you directed Submarshal Skarpa, as well as Lady Vaelora, and Commander Quaeryt, acting as your envoys to those not within the domains of Bovaria and Telaryn, to secure the border with Antiago and to obtain the allegiance of the High Holders of southern Bovaria. Rather than pledge allegiance, those holders defied Submarshal Skarpa and even refused to meet with Lady Vaelora, then fled into Antiago. To comply with your orders, Southern Army is pursuing these traitors as necessary. In attempting to assure the safety and loyalty of the south, we have undertaken a campaign that has, of necessity, required a greater extension of your power than originally anticipated. As a result, Kephria is now a part of your domains. It may be that other areas of Antiago will also need to be subdued and annexed so that the southern border of your lands will be forever secure, and we will continue to keep you informed of events as they transpire …

"Transpire?" asked Vaelora. "That sounds more like 'expire.' Why not just say 'happen' or 'occur'?"

"'Occur' is better," Quaeryt agreed.

"You also might explain that we gave the traitors every opportunity to meet and pledge allegiance over a period of more than a month."

"That's better."

All in all, after another quint of discussion, Quaeryt took the document and sat back down to redraft it. Before he picked up the pen, he looked up at his wife. "How are you feeling?"

"Well enough, except I feel like I'm wearing small tents instead of clothing, and it won't be that long before I'm wearing large tents."

"You can scarcely tell, and you still look lovely."

"I *still* look lovely? Does that mean you expect I won't before long?"

Quaeryt hid a wince and was about to issue a heated denial-until he saw the smile in her eyes. "I should have said that you will always be lovely."

"To you. Others may think differently."

Quaeryt decided there was little point in pursuing that further. "Can you remember anything else about Aliaro? Anything at all you heard in Solis or that Bhayar or your father might have said?"

"I think I've told you everything I recall…" Vaelora frowned. "Oh … there is one thing. Daesn-he died last winter-he was Father's envoy to Liantiago. He arranged Chaerila's betrothal. He mentioned something about Aliaro's imagers having to live in metal-lined chambers-"

"Cells, I imagine," snorted Quaeryt.

"No. He definitely said chambers. He said it was because they were unhappy."

Unhappy? Abruptly Quaeryt understood … or thought he might.

"What is it?"

"Imaging is much harder in dealing with metal. If his imagers were unhappy, and they lived in metal-lined chambers…"

"They couldn't image to harm the Autarch." She frowned. "Wouldn't it make more sense to keep them away from the palace?"

"Why do you think all the imagers report to me?" he asked.

"Oh … of course." She shook her head ruefully. "That's because Bhayar trusts you to keep them in line."

"And why few rulers have had many imagers." *And why all too many died in strange circumstances … something you'll always need to keep in mind.* He waited. "Can you think of anything else?"

"Not right now."

"Then I'd better rewrite this and get it to Skarpa."

"You should." She smiled. "You changed the subject rather deftly."

He laughed. "Hardly. If I'd been deft, you wouldn't have noticed."

Her smile grew broader, then faded. "You're still leaving tomorrow?"

"Seventh glass."

"How long will it take to reach Suemyran? If you encounter no opposition?"

Quaeryt shrugged. "I can't say. The road south looks better than those along the Aluse-except for the old Naedaran stone roads-but it might be as long as ten days. I'd be surprised if we had much opposition until we reach Barna. Aliaro's never had a huge army, and he's moved his forces by ship."

"His ships will find out that you've taken Kephria and bring him word faster than a courier could."

"That's true, but he'll have to gather forces and move them. He won't have many, if any, stationed away from the coastal cities. And he won't know if we've just taken Kephria or if we intend more. I

suspect he'll have trouble believing what we have in mind."

"I do hope so, dearest."

So do I. With a faint smile, Quaeryt reached for another sheet of paper and picked up the pen.

Vaelora walked to the window and looked out into the early evening.

54

Southern Army and Quaeryt's forces departed from Kephria on Mardi morning almost two quints before seventh glass, heading south on the road to Suemyran, a road that proved over the next three days to be adequate and whose condition appeared to improve with each mille that Southern Army traveled.

Just after midday on Jeudi, a day so clear and warm that Quaeryt had removed his riding jacket, they approached a small town whose name-as chiseled on the millestone-was Clianto. To the north of the town were low hills covered with orchards, mostly of olives. Several hundred yards ahead, on the right, a young man leading a donkey pulling a cart stopped dead, as if frozen where he stood as he looked from the outriders to the troopers that followed. Then, after several moments, he immediately turned the cart down a lane and began to run, yanking on the donkey's leads, trying to get the animal to move faster.

"There's another poor boy who can't believe what he's seeing," Quaeryt said to Skarpa, riding beside him. Every day since they'd left Kephria, Quaeryt had seen similar reactions by the Antiagons, and he couldn't blame them. First was the shock, and then the fear.

"You can't blame them. So far as I know, no one's ever invaded Antiago." Skarpa looked to Quaeryt. "You're the scholar. Is that so?"

"The Naedarans held some of the Lohan Hills, but nothing this far south."

"They got around, from what you've said."

"It's hard to say, but at the height of their power, their land was likely half the size of old Tela."

"They had imagers, too. So why didn't they expand more?"

"For the same reason no one's used imagers effectively since then." Quaeryt laughed softly. "Rulers don't trust imagers, and they don't use them effectively."

"You're trying to change that."

"Trying is a good way of describing it." Quaeryt didn't want to go into more detail, not when part of the reason for invading Antiago was tied to his ambitions for assuring that life for imagers in all Lydar would be far better in the future than it was or had been.

As they neared the edge of the town, Quaeryt raised the heaviest shields he could, not because he expected any attack, but as another way of keeping in practice, then turned in the saddle. "Imagers! Full shields!" As he turned back to study the town, he could hear one set of words.

"… not like the attacks on Nordeau…"

Quaeryt wanted to shake his head at Threkhyl's muttered comment. Instead, he ignored it and concentrated on learning what he could about Clianto and what the town might tell him about Antiago.

"Can't believe how much warmer it is here than even in Kephria," observed Skarpa. "Not even a sign of Antiagon troopers."

"There hasn't been time for Aliaro to learn that we're here." Quaeryt glanced to the slightly higher hills to the east, where he spied a white-walled villa, large, but not sprawling, and certainly not close to the size of a Bovarian or Telaryn high holding. Perhaps two milles farther south along the eastern hills was a second villa, somewhat smaller, whose walls were a pinkish off-white. A single rider galloped along the last few hundred yards of the road leading to the first villa, but no dust rose in his tracks, suggesting a far better surface than Quaeryt had seen on most roads in Bovaria.

The dwellings on the outskirts of the town were built of some sort of brick covered with stucco and then whitewashed, although the wash on many houses had faded or been turned faintly rose-colored by dust from the reddish dirt. Roofs were either flat or gently sloped, suggesting that excessive rain was not a problem.

While Quaeryt saw a few men and women farther toward the center of town hurrying into buildings, the streets, lanes, and alleys were empty as Southern Army rode down the main street. Not all shutters were closed, but most were. Those that were not likely could not be easily closed, Quaeryt suspected. Just as he was about to suggest that they stop in the central square to water mounts and see what they could learn, two riders in green livery rode out of a side street and turned their mounts south.

Quaeryt thought about trying to image, but the riders were already more than a hundred yards away, and anything he did at that distance that would be effective would likely also be fatal. "Zhelan! Send a squad after those two!"

"Yes, sir! Second squad! Forward!"

Second squad moved out after the liveried riders, but not at a gallop.

"Young idiots," snorted Skarpa. "Charging off will tire their mounts too fast. Older riders would have walked their mounts down a side street and sneaked out of town. We never would have seen them."

"Jhalet's got some of the best mounts and riders," said Zhelan from behind the two senior officers. "If anyone can catch them, he can."

Quaeryt said nothing, well aware that he still knew far too little about horses and how to pace them. Instead, as first company reined up in the square, he quietly surveyed the buildings, taking in what likely passed for a chandlery, then a small cloth factorage.

On the west side was one of the pair of two-story structures in view, the other being the inn, and the only stone building fronting the square. After several moments, a white-haired man wearing dark gray trousers and a white shirt emerged from the stone structure and walked slowly toward Skarpa and Quaeryt, finally halting a good five yards away and bowing before speaking. “Honored sirs.”

It took a moment for Quaeryt to understand his words, as heavily accented as they were, so much so that the way the older man spoke was almost like another language. Quaeryt was glad it wasn’t. Having three languages in Lydar was bad enough. “Are you the councilor for Clianto?”

“No, sir. I am Khelito. I am the administrator appointed by the Autarch.” The man’s voice was pleasant, but edged with concern. “What would you have of us, honored sirs?”

“Water, and some supplies,” replied Skarpa.

“We have little. Clianto is not a wealthy town. Might I ask why armed men in strange uniforms are riding through Antiago?”

Skarpa looked to Quaeryt.

“The uniforms are those of Telaryn,” explained Quaeryt. “Lord Bhayar of Telaryn has combined Bovaria with Telaryn. Autarch Aliaro’s ships have attacked Telaryn ships without provocation, and a number of Bovarian High Holders have fled into Antiago rather than pledge allegiance to Lord Bhayar. That is why we are here.”

“There are no High Holders here, honored sir.”

“I am certain that is so, administrator”-Quaeryt almost said councilor-“but we are on our way to deal with the Autarch.”

“Then, Lord Bhayar intends to take our lands and make Antiago part of Telaryn?”

“He intends to make all Lydar one land. He has no intention of taking your lands. He will only take the lands of those who raise arms against him or who aid those who do.”

“We have no arms to raise. We have little enough to aid ourselves.”

“You have fine olive orchards.” The plea of poverty was getting on Quaeryt’s nerves, given that the town looked moderately prosperous.

“We do not own the orchards. Shahib Folinero does.”

“Is one of the villas to the east his?”

Khelito laughed gently. “No. The larger one belongs to Orchard Master Ghario. He manages the orchards for the Shahib. The lesser one belongs to Orchard Master Zheno. He manages the orchards to the south for Shahiba Shenia.”

“And they both live in Liantiago?”

“Of course. How could it be otherwise?”

"You don't see Antiagon armsmen near here, I take it?"

"Not often. Last spring, many marched through here on their way north." The administrator shrugged. "They must have returned to Liantiago another way. They did not return by the north road."

"Do you collect the tariffs for Autarch Aliaro?"

"Who else would do so?" Khelito's voice was tinged with puzzlement, as if any other arrangement would have been unthinkable.

"Who collects them from you?"

"Those who come from Liantiago who serve the most noble Autarch."

"Who are these collectors?"

"They are the regional tariff collectors."

"Do armsmen accompany them? How many?"

"I have not counted them. There are not many."

"Who besides collectors and armsmen?" Quaeryt could tell that Skarpa was puzzled at the line of questioning.

"I would not know who they are, only that the tariff collectors defer to them."

"Do the armsmen defer more to those you do not know than to the tariff collectors?"

There was the slightest trace of hesitation before Khelito replied, "I could not say, honored sir."

While Skarpa issued orders for regiments to water their mounts and then re-form on the south side of the town, Quaeryt dismounted and continued to talk with the town administrator.

"What maps do you have of the land, and the way to Suemyran?"

"Maps? There might be one…"

More than a glass later, when the regiments were re-formed on the south side of town, and several wagons loaded with grain for the mounts, Quaeryt watched as Jhalet led second squad-and two men in green livery with gold piping on their jackets and trousers, their hands bound, and their mounts on leads-back up the road.

"One of them threw this into a false olive hedgerow," reported Jhalet, riding up beside Quaeryt and extending a brown leather dispatch folder.

Both captive riders looked to be young, if older than Quaeryt's youngest undercaptains, and neither looked directly at Quaeryt. "Who do you serve?"

The younger of the two shook his head.

The other rider said, "High Holder Chaelaet." He glanced at the other. "They'll find out soon enough."

Quaeryt glanced toward Skarpa, who had ridden over. He held up the case. "Do you want to read it first?"

"Go ahead."

Quaeryt turned to Jhalet. "If you would hold the prisoners over there until we finish?"

"Yes, sir."

After waiting until the captives were out of earshot, Quaeryt opened the case and extracted the single folded and sealed sheet, breaking the green wax and unfolding the parchment, then began to read.

Your most puissant power-

Most puissant power? Talk about trying to curry favor. Quaeryt couldn't help but smile as he continued reading.

As a longtime admirer and ally, which you know well, I regret that I must be the bearer of tidings less than favorable. As I reported in an earlier dispatch, the tyrant Bhayar insisted on a fawning and impoverishing allegiance on the part of High Holders in southern Bovaria. When we refused to meet with his submarshal, he leveled five holds so thoroughly that nothing remains. It is said that this was accomplished by imagers, but I cannot verify this. The invading army is apparently comprised of three to four battle-tested regiments, mixed foot and mounted, far too large for our forces, but certainly not beyond your capabilities, especially since, knowing you to be a just and reasonable ruler, we would be willing to place our resources at your disposal in repelling the invaders …

After finishing the letter or dispatch-Quaeryt wasn't sure what to call it-he extended it to Skarpa and waited.

When Skarpa finished, he smiled sardonically. "What do you think?"

"It's a veiled plea and bargain. Chaelaet is saying he and the other High Holders will support Aliaro if Aliaro will destroy us. But there's so much evasion and distortion…"

"Like his not being able to verify that you used imagers?"

"That, and the fact they all fled over the border to avoid meeting with us."

"They're all pissing-in-their pants scared of you and the imagers, and they're not about to admit it to Aliaro."

"Because they don't want him coming to terms with Bhayar and because they want him to destroy the invading force so that they can secede and become part of Antiago?"

"That's the way it looks. They know that they've burned their bridges with Bhayar."

"That's true … but they didn't have to."

"People are like that," Skarpa said. "They get an idea in their heads, and when things don't go the way they think they should, they don't think. They react and do something stupid … and they'll blame someone else."

“I need to see what else I can find out.” Quaeryt gestured toward the two captives.

“Let me know.” Skarpa slipped the dispatch back into the case and extended it back to Quaeryt. “Question them on the ride. We need to get moving.”

“I’ll do that. Don’t you want to keep the letter?”

The submarshal shook his head. “I can’t do anything with it, but it might help us both if you keep it safe. You’ll see Bhayar sooner than I will.” Skarpa smiled, then turned his mount.

“Only if he’s displeased with me.” *And that’s getting more and more likely.*

Quaeryt eased the mare over to where Jhalet waited with the captives, but didn’t begin questioning them until the entire column was moving south and he was riding between them behind Skarpa and Zhelan.

“What’s your name?” Quaeryt asked the older captive.

“Erlaet.”

“Where did you leave High Holder Chaelaet?”

“North of here … and east. Town called Vholia.”

Quaeryt had to concentrate to understand, because the southern Bovarian accent was almost as heavy as that of the Antiagons. “How far south from Chaelaet?”

“Two days’ ride.”

Two quints and scores of questions later, he’d discovered very little else that shed light on where Chaelaet and the other fleeing High Holders might be, at least not until he could talk with someone who knew the geography and towns along the Lohan Hills.

55

For the next three days, under slightly hazy but sunny skies, Southern Army marched and rode southward through towns invariably similar in architecture and agriculture to Clianto and the lands surrounding it. Early on Meredi morning, Quaeryt and Skarpa sat at opposite sides of a small table in the study of a villa in Nankico, a town perhaps half the size of Laaryn. The villa was normally used by the orchard manager of a Shahib Alzonio, who was resident, unsurprisingly, in Liantiago.

"We should reach Suemyran late the day after tomorrow," said Skarpa. "That's if we don't run into trouble."

"I'd think that Aliaro might at least have a garrison or outpost there," ventured Quaeryt.

"You think we should see about surprising a post when we don't even know if there is one and where it might be?"

"I was thinking about sending a battalion around Suemyran and setting up a hidden picket line on the road to Barna. The local commander, if there is one, or the town administrator might just send a courier or a messenger to Barna and then on to Liantiago. We don't have to know where the post is-just the route that a messenger might take."

"And you have your maps," said Skarpa.

The entire time Southern Army had been on the move, Quaeryt had made inquiries in all the towns and hamlets through which they had passed and, after Clianto, especially at the larger villas about maps of Antiago. The best maps had come from the villas, along with a growing confirmation that the Shahibs and Shahibas of Antiago were effectively the equivalent of High Holders-and that all of them seemed to live near Liantiago. Two maps in particular depicted the roads in and around Suemyran in detail.

"They all show the same roads to the west. Both of them-the old road and the new road."

"That might help. It can't hurt. You'd planned on sending one of Alazyn's battalions?"

"Whichever one he recommends," Quaeryt replied.

"It can't hurt."

"You think someone has already sent a message to Aliaro?"

"I'd be astounded if someone hasn't."

"It won't be any of the town administrators," replied Quaeryt. "They're not the type to volunteer anything unless they have to, and we haven't raided town treasuries." *As much because there wasn't anything in them.* "More likely one of the orchard managers who's sent

a message to Liantiago to explain what happened to the grain and flour and mutton we've taken."

"Aliaro will find out soon enough. One way or another."

"But which Shahib will want to tell him?" asked Quaeryt, recalling just how few High Holders ever wanted to tell Bhayar anything negative-unless it enhanced their position, and Quaeryt couldn't see how any Antiagon Shahib could benefit from reporting a Telaryn army.

Although someone is bound to find a way to turn it to their benefit. Some holders and their like always do.

"Someone will." Skarpa paused. "I don't trust any of those town administrators."

"I'd agree. They're hiding what they feel, in a way that shows long practice. I have to wonder if the Autarch sends imagers out with the tariff collectors. You noticed how several of the administrators never answered my questions about who came with them?"

"More here than meets the eye." Skarpa nodded. "Do you think the *Montagne* has returned by now?"

"We're inland, but we haven't seen any sign of storms. We should have if the weather over the Gulf has been bad. Then again, I'm not sure I trust Nykaal to press much, even in fair seas. I wouldn't be surprised if Calkoran didn't return before Khaern and his last battalions."

"I'd put the wager on Calkoran," said Skarpa dryly. "Do you think Aliaro will send ships and troops to try to retake Kephria?"

"It's always possible, but it will take time. By then, hopefully, we'll have given him a more immediate worry." Quaeryt didn't mention his concerns about Vaelora. There was little enough he could do now, and he'd given Baarl orders to withdraw if the Antiagons appeared in overwhelming force.

"Anything else?"

"Besides what we've already talked over?" Quaeryt shook his head. "Supplies will always be a problem."

"Before long, we'll have other problems."

"Like Antiagon Fire, cannon, musketeers, and Antiagon imagers?"

"Don't you think so?"

"It's all possible, but we do have the advantage that we're attacking from behind their defenses. It's pretty clear that because of the Lohan Hills, the Sud Swamp, and the high deserts along the southern coast, the autarchs have always felt their warships were their best defense, and that attacks would come against Kephria and Liantiago … or Westisle."

Skarpa shook his head. "You may be right, but except for the wall, there weren't many defenses in Kephria. There have to be more

somewhere?"

"We saw five warships on the way to Kherseilles, and a pair of different ones on the return, and that was just in the Gulf of Khellor."

"What about imagers?"

"The Autarch has them. How many I don't know," admitted Quaeryt. "I'm not certain anyone knows. There have to be troopers because Aliaro wouldn't have sent an entire regiment to Bovaria without others remaining here. We know about the Antiagon Fire."

"I don't know," said Skarpa. "There has to be more."

"I'm sure there is," replied Quaeryt. "It's just not here. That makes sense. There's not much of value here, either, except olive orchards and crops. I'd wager that most of the defenses are around Liantiago and Westisle."

"You're saying we'll have an easy time of it until we get near there?"

Quaeryt offered a rueful smile. "I'll never say that. I will say that it will get harder as we near Liantiago. But you know that."

Skarpa nodded, then rose. "Time to head out."

56

Although Skarpa and Quaeryt had discussed sending just one battalion to seal off the road from Suemyran to Barna and on to Liantiago, on Meredi evening the submarshal had drawn Quaeryt aside and said, "I'd feel better if you'd take all of Nineteenth Regiment and first company-just in case. They just might have a regiment and imagers."

So, in the dimness well before sixth glass on Jeudi morning, behind scouts and outriders, Quaeryt and Alazyn led Nineteenth Regiment and first company to the west and south of Suemyran, along a side road that was little more than a lane, if lightly graveled and well packed. The leaves of the olive orchards to the west of the lane looked gray in the early light, and the shoots in the fields to the east were already almost knee-high. Quaeryt had no idea what the plants might be, except that they were not maize, because maize took great amounts of water, and the ditches that flanked the fields were empty.

"The old road runs almost three milles to the south of the new road … if the maps are correct," he said to Alazyn. "That's where this lane joins it. If the Antiagons withdraw from Suemyran, they'll send most, if not all, of their troopers on the new road. Still … we need to cover the older road, just in case. How big a force do you think we should dispatch?"

"I'd recommend a battalion, sir, with couriers standing by. That way, we can shift battalions as needed."

"Which battalion?"

"Fourth. Major Daelor is good at independent operations."

Meaning that he'd like to be the subcommander. "Fourth it is. You can brief him and send the battalion off once we reach the new road."

By a quint past sixth glass, Nineteenth Regiment had reached the "new" road, the first paved thoroughfare Quaeryt had seen in Antiago-except for the short section of road Threkhyl had laid down through the taudis on the north side of Kephria. Before long, based on reports from the scouts, Quaeryt and Alazyn agreed that the best location to set up a possible ambush and entrapment was where the road curved around a low hill and past a small pond fed by a stream.

Two battalions could move from behind the hill to block the road on the west, and the third could move up behind any Antiagon force on the east. While there were fields on the south side of the road, they were open and offered little cover, should the Antiagons attempt to flee southward. There was a lane leading south, farther back to the east, along which Major Daelor had taken fourth battalion to reach the old road to Barna. Just in case there might be stragglers who would

try to reach the lane, Quaeryt had Alazyn station one company a half mille farther south along the lane.

Then they settled in to wait.

"How big a force do you think they have in Suemyran?" Alazyn finally asked.

"They might not have any troopers at all. Or they might have a full regiment. I think it's unlikely they'll have more than a battalion this far from the coast … but we just don't know."

"Do you know why they didn't have more troopers in Kephria?"

"No. Not really. I'd guess that it's because there's really nothing to protect there, and because, until we came along, there wasn't any real threat, either. Although they squabbled, Kharst and Aliaro were essentially allies … at least in the sense that both opposed Bhayar."

"But didn't they fight over Kephria and Ephra?"

"Aliaro shelled Ephra. Kharst raided Kephria, and then Aliaro killed the raiders. That was it. They both decided, it appears, that Kephria and Ephra weren't worth any more fighting."

"I could have told them that after looking at them," replied Alazyn dryly.

"Sometimes, rulers don't see what others do."

By eighth glass, Quaeryt was about to believe that his idea of cutting off any Antiagon withdrawal had been a bad idea-or at least that there hadn't been any forces to cut off. A quint later, a scout reined up beside him on the backside of the hill.

"Sir … the Antiagons are coming."

"How many?"

"More than a company, less than two. All mounted and one wagon."

"Thank you." Quaeryt turned to Alazyn. "I think we have enough force that we might not even have to fight, but the men need to be prepared."

The subcommander nodded.

Quaeryt waited until the Antiagon troopers were on the road almost between the hill and the pond before the three battalions moved into position.

The Antiagon force consisted of perhaps a company of riders in maroon and white uniforms, riding quickly, followed by a single wagon heaped high with items covered by a canvas tarp and drawn by two dray horses. The driver kept looking back over his shoulder, perhaps because there was no rear guard, then reined up the team as he saw third battalion close off the road to the east.

Quaeryt had taken a position on the lower gentle slope of the hill, high enough that he could see the road and all his forces. He watched, ready to order an attack, as the Antiagon company reined up.

An officer near the front of the column, likely a captain, rode forward.

"You can surrender, Captain," said Quaeryt, image-projecting his voice, "or you can be attacked and likely perish to the last man. If you surrender, you and your men will be disarmed and taken prisoner."

"How do I know that?" shouted the captain in the thick Antiagon accent or dialect.

At that moment the wagon driver turned the team, skidding slightly on the shoulder of the road, then flicked the reins as he guided the wagon back east toward the side land heading south.

"Undercaptain Lhandor, image off the wagon wheels!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Major Zhelan, send a squad to capture the wagon and driver!"

Only then did Quaeryt see two men along the side of the lane, apparently working on repairing a ditch. Both looked stunned as the team and wagon rolled in their direction, especially as the front wheels of the wagon vanished, and the wagon bed slammed down on the lane, then dug in. In moments, the wagon bed, the traces, and the horses were a tangled mess, and one was screaming in agony. A second look told Quaeryt that the wagon bed had skidded into one of the workers and knocked him down on the shoulder of the road.

Quaeryt glanced back to the Antiagon captain, who had turned in the saddle and watched the wagon crash before looking back to Quaeryt. "Surrender or not?"

"We will take your word, sir. We have neither imagers nor our Fire."

"I'll send a squad down to collect your weapons." Quaeryt turned. "Lhandor, Horan, you accompany the squad to collect arms. Your job is to shield the troopers collecting the weapons."

"Yes, sir."

As the two imager undercaptains moved forward to join the designated squad, Quaeryt turned to Alazyn. "We'd best send a messenger to Major Daelor." Then he glanced back. "Major Zhelan, if you'd assign a squad to accompany Undercaptain Khalis to see about injuries in that wagon crash and to see about repairing the wagon."

"Yes, sir."

In less than a quint, the Antiagon prisoners had been disarmed and were surrounded. Quaeryt rode down the slope, accompanied by five troopers from first company and Voltyr, and gestured for the Antiagon officer to join him.

"I'm Quaeryt, Commander, Telaryn forces. You are?"

"Captain Sentio A'Rhedir, Commander."

"We need to take a look at your wagon, Captain, and your teamster."

The faintest expression of puzzlement crossed the tanned face of the dark-haired Antiagon officer. “As you wish, Commander.”

As they neared the wrecked wagon, Quaeryt saw Khalis kneeling by the injured ditch worker.

The undercaptain looked up. “The wagon skidded into him and broke his leg. I’ve splinted it as well as I can. He’ll need a real healer, though.”

“Can you and Voltyr image the wagon back together?”

“If someone will unload it.” Voltyr grinned. “We’ve learned more about wheelwrighting since the first time.”

“What’s in the wagon?” Quaeryt asked the captain.

“Weapons, rations, a paychest, spare riding gear, farrier supplies…” Sentio shrugged.

“Fine. We’ll have some of your men unload it.”

“But … they’re troopers, not loaders.”

“At the moment they’re prisoners,” Quaeryt said dryly.

“Ah … yes.”

Quaeryt glanced sharply at the captain, who immediately looked down.

True to their word, Voltyr and Khalis did return the wagon back to working order, although it took almost a glass before it was in shape to be reloaded.

“You will bring him back to Suemyran?” asked Sentio as two troopers hoisted the injured worker onto the seat beside the trooper who had taken over as teamster.

“There’s no reason not to, is there?”

“But he will be leaving his lands.”

“We don’t have time to seek out the local healer.” *If there even is one.*

“He will be punished for leaving his lands.”

Quaeryt tried not to show his astonishment, given that the worker had been injured because the Antiagon driver had tried to escape. Even so, he didn’t have a good reply, knowing that he and Skarpa didn’t have the forces necessary to garrison and govern even the major towns and cities along the way to Liantiago. Finally he said, “We can only do what we can.”

Sentio did not reply.

“What were your duties in Suemyran?” Quaeryt asked the Antiagon captain once Nineteenth Regiment and the prisoners were riding back eastward toward Suemyran.

“We were posted here because of the bandits in the Khoro area. We sent patrols along the roads so that the cargoes of olive oil and other crops were not disturbed. No one ever raided where we patrolled.”

“What were they raiding?” asked Quaeryt, curious because one of the maps had shown Khoro as a small town to the west of Suemyran, practically at the foot of the rugged and rocky hills that separated the orchard regions of Antiago from the inhospitable high desert badlands of the south and east. He had to wonder what there might be of value there.

“Who could tell?” replied the captain. “We never caught any of them, and the locals wouldn’t tell us. They are not very bright, you know?”

Quaeryt suspected that the locals were far brighter than Sentio knew, if only because they knew enough to keep secrets. “Where are you from?”

“Liantiago.”

“Are all officers from Liantiago?”

“I would not say that all are, but most I have known are from Liantiago or from villas nearby.”

“What does your father do?”

“He is of the Ascendency, of course.”

“The Ascendency?”

“The Ascendents are the families who are the foundation of prosperity.”

“The large factors and landholders, the ones who own the olive orchards in the north and the palm oil plantations south of Liantiago?”

“And those who have built the great trading fleets.”

“Your father is one of those? A Shahib?”

“His fleet is modest compared to some.”

“How many older brothers do you have?”

“Five.”

Quaeryt almost nodded, but continued his questions as they rode.

Quaeryt and Nineteenth Regiment had not even reached the western edge of Suemyran when a squad from Southern Army rode toward them.

“Submarshal Skarpa holds the city,” announced the squad leader. “The Antiagons had a small post, but it was deserted.”

“We captured the company that held the post. If you’d carry that message back to the submarshal.”

“Yes, sir.”

By the first glass of the afternoon, Quaeryt and Nineteenth Regiment were riding along the wide central boulevard of Suemyran toward the central square. On one low rise along the western end of the city Quaeryt noted close to a hundred large villas. Two quints later, he was meeting with Skarpa in the gaming room of the largest inn of Suemyran, located on the north side of the main square. The inn was built like a two-story villa around a central courtyard that

held a fountained garden.

"What do you think we should do with the prisoners?" asked Skarpa.

"Take their uniforms, weapons, and mounts, and leave them here. I doubt that many, if any, will want to walk to Barna … or Liantiago. Otherwise, we'd have to leave a detachment to guard them, and that doesn't make much sense, one way or the other."

"I don't like it, but it makes sense." Skarpa paused. "What about those two riders of Chaelaet's?"

"Leave them here, too."

"What do we do with whatever forces we encounter in Barna? If there's a detachment posted here, there's bound to be one there."

Quaeryt shrugged. "I think we'll have to make that decision when we get there. We may not have a decision to make, either. They may be ordered to fight to the last man … or to withdraw to Liantiago."

"Or to harass us all the way there."

Quaeryt nodded, but he was still thinking about the reaction of Captain Sentio and what it might mean … and what lay ahead of them in Barna and in Liantiago.

57

Over the next eight days, while Quaeryt had the sense that they were being watched as they rode westward toward Barna, none of the scouts could find any tracks that might have supported that feeling, and the people in the towns through which they passed seemed to know nothing about any Antiagon troopers.

On Solayi, near midmorning under a clear and bright winter sky, not that it seemed much like winter, Quaeryt stiffened in the saddle, glancing toward the northwest and a slightly higher hill, covered only at the top with trees bearing gold-tinted green leaves. Quaeryt hadn't seen any trees like them until the past few days, and every time he'd seen them, he'd observed that each stand was on a hilltop unconnected to any other forested area.

"Gets to you after a while, doesn't it?" asked Skarpa. "You have the feeling people are watching, but you never see them, and no one knows anything about them."

"Or no one wants to tell you anything about them. It seems like everyone is too frightened to say anything about Aliaro or whatever Shahib owns the lands."

"Don't know what it is, but they're scared. They're not scared of the Antiagon troopers. They're cautious around them, but not frightened," added Skarpa.

It has to be imagers, because there isn't any other thing it could be … or something else of power having to do with the Autarch or the Shahibs. That bothered Quaeryt-a lot-because he wanted to build the imagers into a force to support Bhayar, but he didn't like the aura of quiet fear he'd seen in the cities and towns of Antiago so far. *Would it be different if only High Holders and wealthy factors had to worry?* He didn't have an answer for that question … as he didn't for so many.

"You're worried about an Antiagon attack," observed Quaeryt. "Where would you attack us?"

"Right now," replied Skarpa, not quite humorously. "We don't know exactly where we are, and we're really not in the best fighting formation, because you can't travel as fast if you're set for battle."

"There's no cover nearby," Quaeryt pointed out.

"If they put cannon on one of those hills and aimed down along the road, we'd take casualties even if we broke and regrouped immediately. With all their warships, they must have cannon somewhere here in Antiago."

"Cannon are heavy. That's why Kharst didn't have many except close to Variana."

Skarpa grinned. "The road is paved, and how many large cities

are left before us?"

"You're saying we should expect cannon … soon."

"I've ordered the scouts to look for any traces of heavy wear on the road or especially leaving it, and they're scouting in squads."

"So that someone is likely to return if they run into trouble?"

The submarshal nodded. "I don't like it when things are too quiet and they shouldn't be."

"That's why you have the scouts farther out than usual." Quaeryt was just repeating what Skarpa had said earlier, trying to see if the older officer would add anything.

"The last thing we need to do is find ourselves riding into massed cannon, even with you and the imagers. Riding into heavy cannon fire in terrain we don't know with a force as small as we have…"

"In short, when you've got almost thirty regiments you can take some fire, but not with six."

"And not when we're more likely to be facing gunners who know what to do with their weapons."

That unfortunately made sense, and that was why Skarpa and Quaeryt had gone over orders with the regimental commanders on what to do if the Antiagons attempted to shell the column from a distance. Basically, those orders were a refinement on what Quaeryt had done in the last battles against the Bovarians-to move quickly, at an angle.

Skarpa cleared his throat. "You said you thought the Antiagons wouldn't wait until we got too close to Barna or Liantiago. That, if they attacked us at all, they'd do so away from towns or cities."

"You don't think so?"

"I'd be interested in why you thought so. We couldn't maneuver as well in a town or city."

"Have you noticed how well kept the towns are, even the older buildings in them?"

Skarpa nodded, even as his eyes scanned the road ahead and the gentle rolling hills, their heights generally tree-covered.

"I'm just guessing, but everything I've seen or heard suggests that they try to preserve what they have. Using troops and cannon inside a city would go against that. If they're using imagers to build things-or repair them-what they can do at any one time has to be limited."

"Limited? Your imagers rebuilt the entire Chateau Regis in less than three weeks."

"They refinished it and modified some things, and we had the largest gathering of imagers in the history of either Bovaria or Telaryn. The autarchs may have been using imagers longer, and they may have gathered a greater number of imagers from those that they have, but Antiago is a smaller and less populous land-"

“Frig!” Skarpa gestured ahead to where a puff of smoke appeared above the trees on the hillside a good three-fifths of a mille ahead on the north side of the road. On the road to the south of the hilltop, a scouting patrol appeared, galloping back over a low rise in the road, and one trooper was waving a red banner-danger-trying to get Skarpa’s attention.

Almost instantly, the shoulder of the road ahead on the south side of the pavement erupted into a geyser of dirt, stones, and gravel.

“First company! On me!” Holding his imaging shields barely extended away from himself and the mare, Quaeryt urged her forward and to the north side of the road, across a field at an angle toward a stand of trees near the top of a ridge. The imager undercaptains and first company rode close behind him. As he glanced back, he could see Skarpa and Fhaen leading Third Regiment southeast at a quick trot.

Another explosion, even closer to him, so that stones and gravel rattled off his shields, momentarily blocked a better view of what the various regiments were doing. Quaeryt looked to the west, noting the location of the haze of smoke that marked from where the cannon were firing, then guided the mare more to the north so that first company would end up behind the trees.

The time it took first company to reach the trees, the same ones with the gold-tinged leaves, seemed like a full glass, but was far less than half a quint. Once Quaeryt had the company temporarily out of sight, he immediately raised sight shields and led them, at a fast walk, down the far side of the ridge and then along the fields to the west, trying to gauge how to reach the lower edge of the woods from which the Antiagon gunners were firing.

The field grass was barely ankle high as he led first company toward the larger hill from which the cannon were firing, but then, Quaeryt reflected, it was still supposedly late winter, and the meadows and fields in most of Bovaria and Telaryn were still likely cold and possibly frozen, and certainly still snow-covered in Tilbor. He could almost feel the passage of cannonballs across the sky to the south before they landed and exploded, but with the ridge between him and the road, he had no idea how effective the Antiagon gunners were being. He did know that he and first company had to put the cannon out of action as soon as possible.

The grassy field sloped down to a depression before slowly rising toward the trees that held the cannon still firing eastward at Southern Army. As he rode closer, all Quaeryt could see was a narrow expanse of dirt and mud, an indication that a stream had run there intermittently. Once he felt that first company was close enough that the cannon could not be depressed enough to fire at first company, he dropped the concealment shields and raised full shields across the

front of the column.

"Imagers! Shields!"

Quaeryt had barely issued the order when a hail of arrows arched out from the trees, the clattered off his shields.

Under the cover of the archers, two squads of troopers in maroon and white uniforms advanced from the woods, half of them bearing long pikes.

"Advance and plant!" called a voice from the trees.

"Threkhyl," said Quaeryt in a low voice image-projected to the undercaptain, "bring the trees down on them."

A sound like rainfall followed a series of creaks and cracking sounds as the greenish gold leaves shivered while the limbs and the trunks bearing those limbs shuddered and then toppled northward onto the advancing pikemen.

Only a handful of the pikemen escaped the tangle of leaves, branches, and limbs, but behind the welter of fallen trees some hundred yards wide were several hundred troopers bearing small round shields larger than bucklers and blades longer than the sabres of first company. Behind them were archers, not quite a company's worth, Quaeryt judged, although it was hard to tell with so many of them partly concealed by the shadows of the tall trees with their green-golden leaves.

Almost absently, Quaeryt noted that the trees were planted in rows. *Another kind of orchard?*

Above them on the hillside, the sound of yet another round being fired echoed down the slope, reminding Quaeryt that the objective was not the archers and the troopers in the woods, but the cannon on the slopes above. Unfortunately, bringing down the line of trees had made charging the archers all but impossible. *And you'll lose too much of first company if you don't deal with the archers.*

"Imagers! Iron darts on the archers!"

As the archers began to fall, the footmen glanced around, then began to break. With that so did the remaining archers.

"Khalis, Lhandor, Voltyr! Hot iron to the cannon!" Quaeryt followed his order by imaging scores of hot iron splinters to the area where the cannon appeared to be. When there was no apparent reaction, he tried again, and a faint flash of pain seared across his eyes, then faded. He took a deep breath.

For several moments nothing seemed to happen. Then the top of the hillside erupted into a geyser of flame, and the ground under the mare's hoofs shook for several moments before subsiding. The remaining handful or so of Antiagon troopers staying in the trees glanced uphill, then turned and sprinted for the woods to the west.

"First company! Hold!" ordered Quaeryt.

"Hold!" echoed Zhelan.

Quaeryt quickly scanned the tree debris between first company and where the Antiagon force had been, but he saw no movement, but it was more likely that any surviving Antiagons were lying low than that the toppling trees had killed or wounded them all.

The flames rising from the top of the hill faded into an orangish yellow light, but did not die away. Slowly, as first company re-formed and as fourth squad took charge of the few handfuls of Antiagon prisoners, that orangish light began to intensify. Before long, thick gray smoke began to billow upward, and a sweetish, almost perfume-like odor filled the air, rather than the acrid scents Quaeryt associated with fire.

"The whole top of the hill's on fire," declared Horan. "Must be oil nut trees."

Quaeryt had read about oil nut trees, but he'd never seen them, nor had he realized how fiercely they might burn. He turned to Zhelan. "The fire's spreading, and it's hot. There's no way we can track down or capture the Antiagons who fled. We need to finish re-forming and head back to Southern Army."

"We're ready to go, sir." Zhelan paused. "We don't know if the rest of Southern Army was attacked, do we?"

Quaeryt appreciated the gentle reminder that they had no idea what they might be heading back toward. "Once we leave here, I'll try to hold concealment shields until we have a better idea of what to expect."

"Yes, sir." The major turned in the saddle. "Head out! On the commander!"

Quaeryt eased the mare forward.

Even after he'd ridden several hundred yards east, he could feel the heat from the burning oil trees on his back, and he had no doubt that the troopers in fourth squad and the prisoners they were marching with felt it even more strongly.

Once first company began to circle back toward the road, Quaeryt asked Zhelan, "Do you have any idea of our casualties?"

"Five wounded, maybe a few more. No deaths so far. The archers were the problem, and the imagers' shields protected most of the men."

"I can't believe the oil nut trees."

"They use the oil for lamps. Must work well," said Zhelan blandly.

Quaeryt couldn't help smiling, but he kept looking at other hilltops and at the road. The section of road to the west of where Southern Army had been was clear, although there were small craters on both sides of the road and places in the road itself where the cannonballs had hit and left shattered stone and small depressions.

Southern Army was largely formed up by the time first company reached the section of the main road east of where Quaeryt had been when the initial cannon fire had begun. Quaeryt saw bodies in maroon and white everywhere. Most of the fallen looked either too young or too old to be proper troopers. Leaving first company in the vanguard position for the continued advance on Barna, Quaeryt rode back to meet Skarpa.

The submarshal gestured toward the raging fire on the hilltop to the west. "What did you do?"

"We blew up the cannon. The fire happened because they were hidden in an oil nut tree plantation. I'd wager that's why all those hilltops with the trees that have golden green leaves are surrounded by pastures and meadows. What happened here?"

"They sent a mounted regiment against us." Skarpa offered a wry smile. "I did tell you that they'd find out we were heading toward Liantiago no matter what we did."

"You were right."

"In a way." Skarpa shook his head. "They were barely trained. They lost over a thousand troopers before the rest broke and fled. There wasn't any point in trying to chase them down. They're scattered all over the countryside."

"And Southern Army?"

"We lost fifty or so, but we've got another hundred fifty, maybe two hundred wounded. The whole thing was designed to see how much they could bleed us without risking really trained troopers, or likely even their best gunners or cannon. Terrible waste of men." The submarshal frowned. "Unless they intend to keep doing the same thing all the way to Liantiago."

"That could be a problem," admitted Quaeryt, "but I can't believe they have that many troops to spare." After a moment he asked, "Did you run into any musketeers?"

"No. Did you?"

"Not a one. A company of archers, but no musketeers."

"Cannon, but no musketeers. That's strange," mused Skarpa. "Can't be because muskets are too heavy, not if they're lugging cannon up on hilltops."

"You think it could be because they don't use muskets on their ships?"

"I have no idea, but it bothers me. I don't want to be surprised the way we were in Bovaria."

Neither did Quaeryt, and he had to admit to himself that it bothered him as well, but there were more than a few aspects to Antiago that were troubling-and they'd likely become even more troubling if he and Skarpa were successful in removing Aliaro and

controlling Liantiago.

58

Southern Army found the small city of Barna both like and unlike Suemyran. Unlike Suemyran, Barna was split into two sections, one on each side of the Arnio River, a very modest and comparatively shallow watercourse, and had a much greater proportion of two-storied and large dwellings than did Suemyran, not to mention far more villas on the surrounding hills. Quaeryt did notice that none of the villas were located near stands of oil nut trees. As in Suemyran, the inhabitants made no protests upon the entry of Southern Army. The dwellings were finished in stucco of various off-white shades … but all, even those in the poorest quarters, were reasonably well maintained. The main streets were all paved, and the paving stones were in good repair.

Once more Skarpa had commandeered the inns and the larger dwellings, and on Lundi evening, after all the troopers had been fed and the officers had eaten, while Telaryn squads patrolled the streets, he and Quaeryt sat in the gaming room in The Inn Bountiful, an expansive structure built as a rectangle around a central garden courtyard.

"All the warehouses are empty," Skarpa said. "They had to have moved everything days before we arrived."

"Nineteenth Regiment has gathered some from the storehouses of the villas out in the hills. They didn't expect us to show up," said Quaeryt.

"I'd wager that they were quietly offended," commented Skarpa.

"They were. Very quietly though, as if to say that matters weren't done that way." *As if regiments, even those of the Autarch, do not bother the stores of the Shahibs.* "Most of them were still more than half empty…"

"Most of the larger dwellings are empty, too. The owners departed well before we arrived, but the crafters and shopkeepers are still here."

"They're the ones who fear that they'll lose everything if they abandon their shops."

"Good thing we're not staying here. If we were, we'd have to start foraging off the people," Skarpa observed.

"I wonder where they sent all the provisions in the city storehouses. We didn't find many wagons accompanying that regiment."

"Back to Liantiago, I'd wager. They had to know that they might need them."

"They also had to know that the attack on us would fail."

"I don't know that I believe that," said Skarpa.

"Did we capture any officers?"

Skarpa frowned. "No … now that I think about it. Some squad leaders, and we found several undercaptains who were killed, but no senior officers."

"They didn't use any Fire, and there wasn't a catapult anywhere in sight. That, along with their performance, suggests barely trained men, as you pointed out. In turn, that means…"

"They expected the assault to fail, and the officers knew it, and rode off," finished Skarpa. "Then why make the attack at all?"

"So the Autarch could see what casualties they could inflict without using their best troopers? To make us overconfident? To be able to tell the Shahibs and Shahibas that he was making every effort to stop the invaders?" Quaeryt shrugged. "Any answer we come up with is just a guess." *And even if we win-when we win-we still may never know.*

After discussing the plans for leaving Barna on the next morning, Quaeryt left the gaming chamber and waited in the back hall until he caught sight of the innkeeper. Mhario was a tall, thin, but muscular figure of a man with a lightly tanned face.

"Innkeeper?"

"Yes, Shahib Commander?"

"Is not your inn, The Inn Bountiful, the most renowned in all of Barna?"

"It is well regarded, Shahib."

"Do not some of the most influential people in the city dine here upon occasion?"

"That has been known to happen."

"And have they not talked of many things?"

"Many people talk of many things. That is true."

"Did some not talk about the fact that we might be occupying the city?"

"I could not say, sir."

"How long did the Antiagon regiment stay in Barna before it marched out to fight?"

"I could not say, Shahib. A few days, perhaps."

"Did any of the officers dine here?"

"They may have. I cannot recall everyone who dines here, you understand." The innkeeper smiled apologetically.

"Have the prices of goods gone up recently, the things you buy for the inn and the public room?"

"I could not…" The innkeeper paused, as if realizing that what seemed to be a standard reply was hardly credible. "They have not so far. I fear that they will, from inquiries I have made."

"When did you find out about the Autarch's decision to strip the warehouses here and send all the provisions to Liantiago?"

"Honored Shahib … I know nothing of that."

"Surely, you must have heard something." Quaeryt projected friendliness and concern.

"All I know, honored sir, is that provisions will be hard to come by."

For all that Quaeryt tried over the next quint, even with image projection, to obtain more information, in the end, he knew little more than he had after the first few questions.

So he made his way out to the stables, where he looked over where the mare was stabled, checking her manger and her feed bag, just hoping that one of the stable boys or the ostler would show up. Before long, one did, a boy who couldn't have been much older than ten.

"Nice mare, she is, sir."

"She's a good mount, and she's been more than good to me." Quaeryt offered a copper. "I'd appreciate it if you'd see to her properly."

"Yes, sir." The copper vanished. The urchin-like boy pushed back raggedly cut hair and grinned.

"You must have stabled a few mounts belonging to the officers of that regiment that passed through here."

"Nhallio wouldn't let me. He wanted their coin." The stable boy shook his head. "They didn't give him any. Hard men they were."

"Sometimes, the officers who get power too young are the hardest."

"None of the ones who came here were young. All of 'em older than you, sir."

"I imagine innkeeper Mhario was most polite to them."

"Had to be. He sent the girls off when he heard they were coming. Bessya almost didn't make it. She had to hide in the loft. Should have seen her shake when she snuck out. Mhario told me to stay out of sight."

"You did, I hope."

"Right that I did."

"Did you see them loading provisions?"

"Nah … the nearest storehouse is down on the river, two blocks over. Jaeklo said they took everything, even the old mule."

"They say where it was all going?"

"Nope…" After a moment the boy added, "They all took the west road, though. No place else to go but Liantiago. The drivers were real teamsters, too. Not troopers."

"The officers say anything about fighting or the like?"

“Not so as I could hear.” The youth frowned. “One of ’em said something was a bloody waste. Couldn’t hear what. Another … he said there’d be a lot of dead heroes.” There was a pause. “There were, weren’t there?”

“The troopers they sent against us weren’t very good. They shouldn’t have been fighting.” Quaeryt shook his head, then handed over another copper. “Keep them safe.”

“That I will, sir.”

Then the boy slipped away into the dimness.

Quaeryt smiled, sadly, then gave the mare a solid pat, before turning and making his way from the stable.

He would have liked to have written to Vaelora, or even better to have received a missive from her, but there was little point in using troopers as dispatch riders … at least not until Liantiago was securely in Telaryn hands. *Will it ever be?*

He pushed that thought away as he walked across the side courtyard back to the inn.

59

Meredi dawned hazy, and by midmorning thick gray clouds rolled in from the west, promising the first rain since before Southern Army had taken Kephria. By noon a warm but light drizzle was falling, but the rain's warmth seemed to vanish when the droplets struck men, mounts, or the road and the ground, creating a knee-high mist and a dampish chill that settled over the land, cloaking the sheep that had earlier seemed ubiquitous … if always at a goodly distance from the stone-paved road that stretched westward through the endless low rolling hills.

"Looks like this will last for days," observed Zhelan, who rode beside Quaeryt while Skarpa was headed back along the column to check with his regimental commanders. "Reminds me of the fall in Cheva. The mist and rain would come in right after harvest and stay until it snowed. Sometimes, the mist turned to an ice fog and stayed."

"You make it sound pretty dismal," said Quaeryt.

"It was. That was when I joined up. Late fall when I was seventeen. I told my father I couldn't take another cold damp year. He said I'd take it and like it. I walked off and joined the old Ninth Regiment-that was one place I knew he couldn't get me."

"Did he try?"

"No idea. We rode off to deal with Tilbor, and I never went back."

"You didn't write?"

"Wasn't much point in it. What would I have said? That I didn't miss the beatings? Or Ma crying when she didn't think anyone saw? Besides, he couldn't read. She couldn't either. I barely knew my letters. Learned more when I saw that those who could read and write got promoted."

"Those who could read and write *and* fight?" suggested Quaeryt.

"Anyone can fight. Fighting smarter is harder-"

Crumptt! The shoulder of the road ahead of Quaeryt exploded, and gobbets of mud and wet grass struck his shields and splattered everywhere.

The mist and drizzle were just heavy enough that at the moment Quaeryt had no idea from where the Antiagons were firing, only that it had to be from somewhere to the east of Southern Army, and most likely not too far from the road.

"First company! Left! On me!" Quaeryt had no reason to head left, but that decision was as much as because the last time he'd led first company to the right. He urged the mare off the pavement and across the shoulder, through a shallow stretch of water that had pooled in a depression below the shoulder, and then up onto the grassy expanse

that stretched southward for a good half mille.

Another explosion-this one on the south side of the road and less than ten yards east of the middle of first company-sprayed more mud, dirt, gravel, and debris across the troopers-and Quaeryt's shields and those of the imager undercaptains-he hoped. The next cannonball exploded well behind first company, but when Quaeryt glanced back, it seemed as though the entire road and the road shoulders as well were a mass of explosions.

He looked to the east and could make out, just barely, what he thought was a flash of orange from a distant hilltop, possibly a good mille or more away. He could see that there was no way that he and first company could reach the gun emplacement through the rain and over wet ground with any speed, not before the heavy bombardment wreaked havoc on Southern Army. The warm drizzle had made the ground even softer and more treacherous than a colder rain might have.

Behind him, more explosions wracked the road, and he could hear men yelling, and the screams of at least one horse.

Warm rain … heat. Do you dare? The whole invasion was your idea. How can you not try?

Trying to draw strength and warmth from the rain and the clouds, Quaeryt concentrated on sending thousands of tiny red-hot iron needles to the area where he had seen the drizzle-cloaked cannon smoke.

Instantly he was cloaked in ice, cold and so imprisoning that he could not breathe. He tried to escape and found that neither his arms nor his legs could move. Nor could he move anything else, no matter how hard he tried. Then, just as suddenly, the ice shattered, and he rocked forward in the saddle gasping for breath.

Two thunderclaps rocked him-one a distant explosion and the other a white hammering slashing impact that rocked his skull, then slashed his vision into tattered shards before another hammer pummeled him into darkness.

When the darkness lifted, Quaeryt was lying on his back, shivering, even though someone had wrapped a blanket around him.

"Sir … can you see me?"

Quaeryt blinked, trying to make out who was speaking. Finally, he saw a face. "Khalis … that you?"

"Yes, sir. Can you sit up and drink? It'll be cold, but it will help."

"Yes … I think…" Quaeryt managed, with the undercaptain's help, to get to a sitting position, but his hands were shaking so much that Khalis had to help him hold the water bottle as he sat on a second blanket. After several swallows, his vision began to clear, but the shaking continued, despite his riding jacket and the blanket around

him. From where he sat, he could see, intermittently, that a light dusting of snow covered the ground for almost half a mille. Beyond that, the ground was brown and wet. The clouds overhead looked lighter in color, but those farther east were still thick and gray.

"The cannon … did … get them…?"

"Yes, sir. The whole hilltop exploded." There was a slight pause. "It was more than a mille away. You imaged hot iron that far?"

"I … tried."

"You succeeded, sir. The scouts reported that there's nothing left except shattered bronze … and ashes. They couldn't get too close."

"They put the cannon … in another oil nut tree orchard?"

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt frowned. "How long has it been?"

"Sir?"

"Since the Antiagons started shelling us."

"Two glasses or so."

Two glasses? Quaeryt sat there for several moments without speaking.

"You might drink some more lager, sir."

Quaeryt did.

He finally stopped shaking and was able to stand when Skarpa rode up from whatever he had been doing, dismounted, and walked over to Quaeryt.

He's been totaling the casualties, no doubt. Quaeryt waited.

"It's good to see you on your feet, Commander. Even if you look as white as deep winter ice."

"I'm glad to be on my feet."

"You know I don't like it when the only thing that saves us from huge losses is something you do that almost kills you." Skarpa looked at Quaeryt. "Someday, you'll do too much."

"It didn't kill me."

"It would have if Zhelan hadn't smashed you out of that ice coffin you created for yourself … and then kept you from falling out of the saddle." The submarshal gave a nod to Zhelan, who had edged closer to the three.

Quaeryt didn't want to dwell on his idiocy in getting himself frozen in ice. "Were there any Antiagon troopers that attacked?"

"No. We didn't see any, and the scouts haven't found any tracks. This time they were relying on cannon. They had the entire road ranged, it looks like."

"How many did we lose?" Quaeryt found he was holding his breath.

"A hundred and fifty outright, another sixty, seventy with wounds."

Quaeryt let his breath out slowly. “That’s all?”

“That was all they had time for. You took them out of action in a fraction of a quint. At the rate they were firing they might have had twenty cannon. They could have taken out an entire regiment before long.” Skarpa paused. “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“Nothing seems to be broken. I’m sore all over, and it’s hard to see, but that’s happened before.”

Skarpa looked to Khalis. “Try to keep him from doing anything else for a while.”

“Yes, sir.”

After Skarpa had mounted and ridden off, Quaeryt looked to Zhelan. “Thank you. I know I wouldn’t be here-”

“Lots of men wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t done what you did.”

“How bad was it for first company?”

“Four men in third squad have shrapnel wounds.”

“How serious?”

“Cuts and bruises except for one. A rock broke his arm. It’s shattered. He’ll likely lose it.”

Quaeryt couldn’t help but wince, but the wince brought on another wave of pain so agonizing that he couldn’t see for a time.

“You need to be careful for a while, sir,” interjected Khalis.

“That’s … clear.”

“The scouts have located some villas a few milles ahead. We’ll be taking quarters there until the weather clears.”

That was fine with Quaeryt.

Later, as he rode slowly eastward, he wondered why the ice hadn’t happened before. He hadn’t been encased in ice at Ferravyl or at the battle at Variana. *Except you made an effort to hold shields against it both times.* This time, he’d been so worried about the casualties to Southern Army that he hadn’t even thought about strengthening his shields. *Anything you do without thinking it through …* He didn’t need to finish the thought.

60

The drizzle turned into freezing rain on Jeudi and was gone by Vendrei morning, when Southern Army resumed its progress toward Liantiago under a cool sun and clear skies. By that afternoon, it was clear that everyone knew the Telaryn forces were coming. Every village and town along the road was largely deserted, with barred doors and shutters fastened tight.

By Samedi morning much of Quaeryt's soreness had subsided, and he only had a faint headache, but he was still wearing his riding jacket fastened shut because he still felt chill, even in full sunlight that was as warm as fall in Tilbor. As he rode through seemingly empty hamlet after hamlet, town after town, Quaeryt couldn't help but wonder why the people closer to Liantiago seemed more worried or concerned than those farther away had been. *Or is it because they're more worried about Aliaro and the Shahibs than about Southern Army?* Then again, his thoughts along that line might just be wishful thinking, but how could he tell?

Solayi morning, after Southern Army had been on the road for a glass or so, Skarpa eased his mount in beside Quaeryt and his mare. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Fairly well … a little chill at times. Otherwise…" Quaeryt shrugged.

"A little chill isn't bad after almost being frozen to death. I still wish-"

"That I wouldn't do things like that?" Quaeryt laughed. "I wish I could think of better ways to deal with matters."

"You can when you deliver homilies," Skarpa pointed out.

"That's because I have time to think about them. When something unexpected happens in the field, I don't have that time." Quaeryt looked quizzically at Skarpa. "You think that it would be useful for the army to have services? Is that it?"

"It wouldn't hurt," replied Skarpa with a grin. "I had hoped. Some of the officers, especially the junior officers…"

"I'll do what I can."

"You always do. That's why I keep saying that you'll end up high in Bhayar's councils."

"I may be listened to, but I doubt I'll ever hold a rank or position higher than this."

"You keep saying that, but you're a commander."

"And you're a submarshal."

"Only because of you." Skarpa paused. "Don't think Kharllon and Meurn haven't alluded to that."

"And they're where they are because of Deucalon and Myskyl."

"Myskyl, I think. He seems to have a way of persuading people."

"I can't say I've found him very persuasive," said Quaeryt dryly.

"You're one of the few. Bhayar might find him persuasive as well, except for you. Don't think Myskyl doesn't know it."

"I wonder how he likes the frozen north."

"He's either avoided it or settled himself into a high holding with a compliant widow."

"If not both."

Once Skarpa rode off, Quaeryt began to split his attention between the road ahead and the hills flanking it, because he didn't want to be caught in another cannonade, and possible ideas for a homily. Since he had left *Rholan and the Nameless* with Vaelora, he wasn't going to be able to page through that volume for ideas. As the glasses passed, though, there were no more cannon attacks, and not even a trace of Antiagon forces.

Why? Why not more attacks as we near Liantiago?

The only idea that Quaeryt had was that Aliaro's forces were limited, and that he was saving them for the defense of Liantiago. In a way, that made perfect sense, because, given the way Antiago was governed, it was clear that without taking the capital city and capturing or removing Aliaro and his ministers and high officials, the entire Southern Army campaign would end up as an almost useless exercise. *Not to mention undercutting everything you and Vaelora tried to accomplish in Khel.*

After pushing that line of thought away-for the moment-Quaeryt tried to concentrate once more coming up with an idea for a decent homily.

By the fourth glass of the afternoon, Southern Army was settled into camp-a group of villas in the hills some ten milles from the outskirts of Liantiago-if both the maps and the millestones were to be believed. Unsurprisingly, the buildings had been largely stripped … except of common items such as heavy kitchen tables and common bedsteads and mattresses-and there were absolutely no supplies.

In the late twilight at sixth glass, those who wanted to attend services gathered on the slope below the main villa, where Quaeryt stood on the terrace. By image-projecting his voice, he made his way through the opening and invocation, a hymn, and the confession-and that had always disturbed him, but the men and officers seemed to need it. Before he knew it, he was beginning the homily.

"… and, as are all evenings under the Nameless, it is a good evening. If you don't think so, you might recall that there are still several yards of snow covering Tilbor at the moment, and most likely a cold and drizzling rain is cloaking Solis right now, while the ground

around Variana is either frozen solid or icy mud … and it's no longer drizzling here … and no one is firing cannon at us." Quaeryt paused for a moment. "All those examples could give you reasons for thinking it is a good evening. Whether for thinking it's a good evening or one not so good, all of us have reasons for why we think matters are the way they are. When we left Suemyran for Barna, I kept wondering why these stands of trees with gold-tinged leaves were only planted on hilltops and why nothing except low grass was planted around them. When some cannon powder exploded, those of us in first company found out the reason why those trees were planted where they were. When they catch fire, they burn hot and fast." Quaeryt did his best to image-project a sense of wry humor.

"But there's a problem with reasons and reasoning. We assume that there must be a reason for everything, and we tend to assume that other people reason in the same way and with the same motives as we do. When we discover that they do not, we often decide that such people are tools of the Namer or that they are not so bright as we are. Yet who is to say that those people are not in turn looking at us and thinking that we are tools of the Namer?

"Why do I say this? Because reasoning is a tool. It is a tool of the mind, but like any tool it can be used for good or ill. An advocate who is skilled with words might well be able to reason well enough to convince any listener that Rholan the Unnamer was the Namer and the Namer was really the Nameless. The tool is only so good as the man who wields it, and there are two parts involved in using any tool. The first is how well it is used, and the second is the purpose for which it is used …

"If the purpose for which reason is used is to distort what is and has been or if a man uses reason to persuade others to do that which is evil, then reason is no more than Naming through the use of clever words and logic…"

His concluding words were simple enough. "… When we reason, let us strive to seek what is and not what we would wish to be, for reason in pursuit of passion, rather than in seeking truth, is Naming merely raised to a higher level of deception."

Once the officers and men had dispersed, Quaeryt walked toward the end of an outbuilding to the west of the others. There he stopped, and under the stars, and the nearly full orb of Artiema, he looked down the long slope toward the ribbon of road he could barely see. That line of gray stretched east and west across the rolling hills. Aware of someone approaching, he glanced up to see Commander Kharllon stopping several yards away.

"It's a long and narrow road," said Kharllon, gesturing toward the road below.

“But well paved,” replied Quaeryt noncommitally.

“I’d heard that you had been a chorister,” offered Commander Kharllon. “It does show.”

Quaeryt offered a polite smile. “Actually, I was a scholar.”

“There’s not that much difference, is there? Both study the unknown and the impractical.”

“Much like officers in peacetime, when war isn’t a problem, don’t you think?” replied Quaeryt gently. “Too often, what’s practical is defined as what we need now, as opposed to what we will need, or what we could do to avoid needing it in the future.”

“Those who are effective in the present often assume that what they see is what others need.”

“Isn’t that true of all of us?” replied Quaeryt with a soft laugh. “We all think that what we understand is what others should as well. We often get angry when we find they don’t see matters as we do.”

“But the most dangerous men are those who are most persuasive, especially when their views are, shall we say, at variance with those who wield power.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Quaeryt. “That’s most likely why Rholan vanished. He was too persuasive and lacked the power to protect his vision of what should be.”

For several moments, Kharllon did not speak, merely looked at Quaeryt. Finally, he said, “It will be interesting to see what comes of this campaign.”

“The unification of all Lydar under Lord Bhayar, I would hope,” replied Quaeryt.

“So would I, but holding all Lydar together might prove even more daunting than conquering it.”

“It all depends on which vision those in power embrace, I would judge,” said Quaeryt.

“With that, I would agree.” Kharllon inclined his head. “Good evening, Commander. By the way, it was an excellent homily.”

Quaeryt watched as the older senior officer walked away, then looked back down at the road. In the east, Erion was rising.

61

On Lundi morning a thin mist drifted in from the west, suggesting to Quaeryt that an even heavier fog might be covering the ground to the west. Either way, with the mist or fog there was less chance for another cannon attack on Southern Army, and Skarpa seemed slightly less worried as he ordered his forces onto the road westward.

Once the order of march was established, with first company leading and Third Regiment riding immediately behind, Skarpa joined Quaeryt. "That was a decent homily last night."

"Decent is a good word for it. It wasn't one of my best. Kharllon thought it was good."

"He talked to you?"

"Not for long. He delivered a not-so-veiled message … something along the lines that I was a dangerous man because I was persuasive and my views were … at variance … with those who were in power. He wasn't that direct, but that was what he meant."

"What did you say?"

"I told him that was why Rholan vanished … and tried to suggest that my interests lay in seeing all Lydar united under Bhayar. He agrees with that, but not with what he feels I want to come after that."

"Did he say what he thought that might be?"

"No, and I didn't ask him to explain. In turn, he refrained from more than generalities. That seemed best." Quaeryt looked directly at Skarpa. "You have something on your mind, don't you? That feeling that something might happen?"

"Not exactly. We've seen cannon, and we've seen troopers, but we haven't seen musketeers or imagers or Antiagon Fire," said Skarpa. "That worries me."

"They might not have that many imagers … or some of their imagers might not have talents that suited to battle." Quaeryt was thinking about Baelthm, whose value in battle was limited largely to self-protection and the ability to stop one or two enemy troopers.

"I can come up with reasons why we might not see imagers … but not Antiagon Fire. That's what they're known for. We even encountered it in Bovaria. Why not here?"

"There's one possibility," suggested Quaeryt. "We always ran into it when they had a fortified position with catapults behind walls. Or when they had regiments of troops."

"That's a thought. It doesn't reassure me." Skarpa shook his head.

"It doesn't reassure me, either, but I don't have any other ideas-except that we'll probably run into it sooner or later."

"That's what I worry about." After riding with Quaeryt for almost

a glass, Skarpa left to brief the scouts, and then rode back along the column to see to each regimental commander.

As Quaeryt rode eastward, he studied the land as well as he could, but saw nothing but recently planted fields and shuttered cots-with occasional villas on more distant hills. Midday came and went, although Quaeryt couldn't have told by the sun because the hazy high clouds had thickened enough to block any hint of its position.

Sometime close to first glass, Skarpa returned and reined in beside Quaeryt. "The scouts have found some tracks ahead, but there's nothing heavy."

"Like cannon?"

"No. A squad of riders, maybe a few more. It looks like they were scouting the road and the shoulders."

"How far ahead?"

"A mille or so."

"How recent are they?"

"Probably yesterday. Might have been the day before."

"Do the tracks continue toward us?"

"No. They stop and retrace their way. That's what the scouts report."

Quaeryt tried to make out what lay ahead, but the combination of uncertain light diffusing through the high hazy clouds and the patches of mist made a clear view difficult. Still, he could see several low hills on each side of the road, rising above the recently planted fields between first company and the nearest hill. The closest hills were more like gentle rises on the north side of the road, with crests little more than twenty yards high, and the closest part of their bases were several hundred yards back from the edge of the road. All were wooded, but not with oil nut trees, and some of the woods extended almost into the fields.

"What are you thinking?" asked the submarshal.

"That sounds like ranging the road."

"My thought as well. I've asked the scouts to check any tracks leaving the road, especially on the side lanes. I'm calling a halt to give everyone a rest while they do."

That made sense to Quaeryt, because the column was on a section of road situated in the middle of rolling rises so low that the land around Southern Army seemed almost flat, and the scattered cots were shuttered tight, without a trace of smoke from the chimneys. The hills immediately ahead looked to be the beginning of the more rugged lands that surrounded Liantiago and the bay that held Westisle.

"The hills beyond those little ones could hide a lot," added Skarpa.

Quaeryt nodded, his eyes on the nearer hills.

"We'll have to see what the scouts find. I'll let you know." With that, Skarpa rode off.

Quaeryt gathered Zhelan, Ghaelyn, and the imager undercaptains at the side of the road.

"We have problems ahead, Commander?" asked Zhelan.

"We might," Quaeryt admitted. "There are Antiagon tracks up ahead."

"Be hard to see in places with all that fog," added Ghaelyn, first company's undercaptain.

"We could be facing anything," said Quaeryt. "Or nothing. But we're getting close to Liantiago, and it's been several days since we've been attacked. I think cannon are unlikely because they're heavy, and we haven't seen enough tracks, not yet, for there to be too many troopers. To my way of thinking, that means we just might be hit with Antiagon Fire next. If that's so, it will come from the hills. I'll be posting imager undercaptains with each of the five squads of first company, and I'll give the order for shields at the first sign of an attack." Quaeryt looked at the undercaptains, especially at Threkhyl, before continuing. "If any of you see anything coming before I do, raise your shields and call out the attack. If there is an attack, they may wait until the first part of the company has passed." He paused. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt turned to Zhelan and Ghaelyn. "If we get attacked by Antiagon Fire, the men need to stay close to their imager-unless the attack takes him out. That's because the imagers can shield against the Fire. So you need to have your squad leaders watch the undercaptains."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt continued with the details for another half quint, including assigning each undercaptain to a squad. Even so, he and first company had to wait another three quints before Skarpa again returned to inform Quaeryt.

"There are tracks up all the hills, but they don't lead anywhere. They just end a hundred yards or so upslope and into the woods … like they rode up and decided that the hill wasn't suitable for what they had in mind." Skarpa shook his head. "I still don't like it."

"You think that they started with the hills the farthest from Liantiago and then worked back toward the city."

"It looks that way."

"But you're not convinced?"

"No, but we can't ride up every hill from here to Liantiago, either. Not unless we intend to take a season to get there."

"Where exactly do the tracks coming toward us end?" asked

Quaeryt.

"Up ahead … do you see where that sty over the low stone wall is?"

"That's what, a half mille from the first of the hills?"

"About that," Skarpa confirmed. "Do you think they've measured out to that point?"

"Not necessarily, but after that point, I'm going to be worrying and very careful."

"Good. I'll let you and first company remain as the vanguard."

"And you'll drop back with Third Regiment?"

"Of course."

"I do so appreciate your confidence … and don't tell me that this whole campaign was my idea. I could scarcely forget it."

Skarpa grinned, then said, "I won't."

"Thank you." Quaeryt shook his head ruefully, then watched as Skarpa turned his mount and rode back to Third Regiment. "Company! Mount up!" Once his men were mounted, he gave the order, "Forward!"

Beside him, Zhelan turned in the saddle and relayed the order.

Although he watched closely after they passed the sty on the stone wall, Quaeryt did not actually extend his personal shields to cover those around him and first squad until they were some four hundred yards from the first hill. At a hundred yards, he gave the order for shields, and he kept studying the first hill as they rode past it, gauging the distance-some hundred yards between its base and the edge of the road. Then he looked to the second and smaller one ahead, just slightly farther from the road.

As they rode closer and then passed the second hill … nothing happened.

Quaeryt looked ahead to the taller and somewhat more rugged hills that separated the rolling fields from lower lands around Liantiago.

"Fire grenade! Fire grenade!" came the call from somewhere behind Quaeryt.

He jerked his head around in time to see a splash of crimson-green-yellow flame rebounding from someone's shields-Lhandor's, he thought-and then there were splashes of flame everywhere, the heat intense despite the shields.

With the mist that rose from the fields, it took Quaeryt several moments to make out from where the fire grenades were being launched-from the second and lower hill slightly farther from the road. Then it took him more time to make out several of the dark objects being catapulted out of the trees-and he began to image them back to where he thought the catapults were, one after the other.

Some exploded in flight, and others vanished …

In that time he obviously missed some grenades because lines of the crimson-greenish-yellow flames continued to explode against imager shields-at least Quaeryt hoped that happened to be the case.

He kept trying to intercept and redirect more of the grenades-and then they stopped. A wave of crimson-greenish-yellow flame rose from an entire section of the lower hill where Quaeryt thought the Antiagon catapults were. Only then did he call a halt to the company and re-form the troopers, ready to make a sweep of the hill, if necessary.

As they watched, in perhaps half a quint, an oval of woods vanished in flame-and not a single Antiagon fled the woods at the base of the hill, not from what he could see.

Quaeryt turned to Zhelan. "How badly were we hurt?"

"You and the imagers kept most of the men from severe burns. A few in fifth squad have splotches in various places. Nothing more."

That was a relief of sorts, but he knew that some of the fire grenades had likely impacted Third Regiment.

"Here comes the submarshal," said Zhelan quietly.

Quaeryt turned in the saddle and watched as Skarpa rode over and reined up beside him.

"Why didn't everything go up in flames, the way the cannon emplacement did?" asked the submarshal.

"These are hardwoods," said Quaeryt. "Maybe they're harder to burn, or the Antiagon Fire might have consumed everything so quickly that it didn't have a chance to spread. It's also been cooler and damper." He shrugged. "Other than that … I just don't know."

Skarpa laughed. "You don't like to admit you don't know, do you?"

"How did you ever guess that?" replied Quaeryt dryly.

"I have watched you upon occasion."

"Once the fire up there dies out totally, I'd like to take a look," said Quaeryt.

"You think you can find out something after everything's burned out?"

"I'd like to look. Besides, I don't think it would hurt to have the scouts really look over the next few milles before we proceed."

"I've already dispatched them."

"Thank you."

It was more than a glass later before Quaeryt and Skarpa rode through the still-smoldering woods on the south side of the hill, accompanied by a squad from Third Regiment. When they reined up at the edge of the cleared area, Quaeryt could see the charred and collapsed remnants of four catapults.

"Shouldn't they have burned to nothing?" asked Skarpa.

“I’d have thought so, but…” Quaeryt looked more closely across the clearing. He thought he could make out the forms of at least ten bodies. His eyes went to the charred framework of the first catapult, then to the second and finally to the third and fourth. All had been burned and partly collapsed in the same fashion.

“What is it?” asked Skarpa.

“You were asking about imagers, remember? These catapults were imaged, I’m fairly sure. I’m guessing that they brought one of them out here, along with some imagers, and used the one as a model for the others. They were imaged out of some kind of wood that’s resistant to fire. They likely imaged the Antiagon Fire grenades into being as well.”

“Could your imagers-”

“Not without knowing what’s inside of them. You might recall that imaging even something as simple as a wheel takes observation and knowledge.”

“I still … if they can do that…”

“I’ve been able to try different forms of imaging for a little more than a year. From what I can tell, the autarchs have been using imagers for a lot longer.”

Skarpa sighed. “I suppose that’s true, but…”

“I know. The more we find out, the more there is to find out.”

“I still don’t see how the scouts missed their tracks,” said Skarpa. “And we didn’t see any traces on the way up, either.”

“If they had an imager with them, he could have imaged away all sign of tracks, and even imaged an extra tree or some underbrush in place.” *Or he could have used concealment shields*, but Quaeryt wasn’t about to admit that possibility publicly, especially not if word might get to Kharllon and Meurn.

When they finally headed back down toward the main road, Quaeryt asked, “What sort of casualties did we take-besides those in first company?”

“Less than fifty, mostly in Third Regiment, and most of those were in the first company.”

Quaeryt feared that some of those might well have resulted from grenades deflected from fifth squad, but that was unavoidable, and the casualties would have been far higher without first company and the imagers leading the way.

62

Skarpa called a halt at fourth glass of Lundi afternoon, at a group of older villas just shy of the short stretch of rugged hills leading down to the lower lands that formed an arc around the bay on which Liantiago was located. Then he called a meeting of all the regimental commanders in the dining room of the largest villa, which held nothing but a long battered table and even more battered straight-backed chairs gathered from various places in the largely stripped villa. Once all seven regimental commanders and Quaeryt were present, from the head of the table Skarpa began, "We have several milles of hills ahead, five or six. At the west end, they drop steeply down to the lands around the bay. The mist is thickening, and it's already hard to see anything in the hills. The scouts haven't had time to cover more than a mille ahead. After what happened earlier today, I'd like to give the scouts plenty of time to scour those hills."

"Do you think that will give the Antiagons more time to form their defenses?" asked Commander Kharllon.

"If they don't have them already in place, I'd be astonished," replied Skarpa. "A little caution on our part won't give them that much more time, and it could save us quite a few troopers." He smiled politely. "I believe that Marshal Deucalon made that observation a number of times when he was commanding Northern Army on the advance up the Aluse."

"At times he did." Kharllon smiled in return.

Quaeryt could almost hear the words left unspoken-"but not in a case like this." He was about to say something when Alazyn cleared his throat.

"I'm one of the most junior here, but it seems to me that the submarshal will get the blame if anything goes wrong. Or have I missed something? It also seems to me that the submarshal's old regiment and Commander Quaeryt's first company have been taking the lead-and the brunt of the attacks. Now … I don't decide any of that. I just follow orders, but it does seem a little strange to me when those who've been shielded are the ones urging against caution and a prudent advance."

For a moment there was silence around the table. Then Kharllon looked at Alazyn, his eyes hard. Meurn looked aghast, but Quaeryt could see that Fhaen was having trouble concealing a smile. Both Fhaasn and Dulaek looked to Paedn, the senior subcommander. No one looked directly at Quaeryt.

Quaeryt thought he knew why Skarpa did not immediately reply, and he kept a pleasant expression on his face and waited.

Paedn laughed, warmly. “A subcommander not afraid to offer the obvious. Don’t look so astonished, Meurn. It does happen, now and again.” The senior subcommander looked to Kharllon. “You asked a good question, and you got a good answer. At least, I thought it was a good one, especially coming from a commander known to move far more quickly than the marshal. Why do you have reservations?”

“It seems to me that the Antiagons are unprepared. I’d prefer to keep them that way,” replied Kharllon, his voice open and pleasant.

“So would we all, I think, but the hills ahead are the last place from where they can mount a surprise attack. We escaped major casualties in the attack earlier today, but I wouldn’t be surprised if fending off those fire grenades left our imagers somewhat … depleted.” Paedn looked to Quaeryt.

“Several of them would not be able to offer the same level of imaging,” replied Quaeryt.

“After any battle, some troopers would like to claim that,” said Kharllon dryly.

“The submarshal has six imager undercaptains,” replied Quaeryt. “There are six regiments. If one or two of your regiments were at half strength, you’d likely be more cautious.” He paused just slightly, before adding, “I’d like to think you would be.”

Fhaen smothered a grin.

“As always,” replied Kharllon, “that would depend on the circumstances.”

“As it does here,” said Skarpa firmly. “Do any of you have any special needs or circumstances of which I should be aware?”

“We could use some boots or a bootmaker before long,” said Meurn. “Or even tanned leather for boot soles.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Skarpa.

“Would you like some fatted steers, too?” murmured someone, but Quaeryt didn’t see who it was, although he suspected Alazyn.

Once Skarpa dealt with other questions involving supplies, set the duty and standby regiments for the evening, and dismissed the senior officers, Quaeryt walked outside and nodded for Alazyn to join him.

“I know, sir. I shouldn’t have said anything, even in Northern Army he was like that. Always saying things without saying them. No one would say anything.”

“That might have been because he’s one of the marshal’s favorites.”

“That’s why he’s here, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised, but no one told me anything like that, and they didn’t tell the submarshal, either.”

“It doesn’t matter. I never expected to make subcommander, and I’ll be Namer-fired if I’ll scrape and bow to a commander who hides

behind other regiments."

"Don't scrape and bow. Smile warmly and politely to him from now on. That will upset him more than anything, now."

Alazyn grinned. "I can do that."

After a few more moments with Alazyn, Quaeryt watched as the dark-haired officer hurried back to his regiment. There wasn't any doubt in his mind that Alazyn had worked his way up through the ranks-and would probably have spent the rest of his time in service as a permanent undercaptain or captain if Kharst hadn't attacked Ferravyl. *But then, you'd probably have rotted away as a princeps somewhere … with a very unhappy wife.* He couldn't help but smile at the irony in that observation, since two years earlier he would have been astonished to have been named a princeps.

He shook his head and made his way to the small building that would serve first company, where he summoned the imager undercaptains. After relaying what Skarpa had in mind, he then looked at Horan. "Have you ever imaged leather?"

The middle-aged imager laughed. "More than once. Wasn't much of a cobbler or bootmaker, but leather I could do."

"One of the foot regiments needs boot leather. Is that possible?"

"Should be. Let's see what I can do. Be a welcome change from what we've been doing."

More than a glass later, just before the cooks were about to begin feeding the troopers, Quaeryt made his way back to the villa Skarpa was using, and then to the study.

The submarshal looked up from the maps on the table too small to be a proper desk. "I haven't heard yet."

"Oh … it's not about that. We have a wagon filled with tanned boot leather out here. I thought you might like to let Subcommander Meurn know about it."

"One of your imagers?" Skarpa brushed hair that was more gray than Quaeryt remembered back off his forehead, then looked directly at the commander.

"He used to be a trapper and lived out from others. The leather looks to be good and sturdy."

"Leave the wagon here. I'll send word. Meurn won't like it."

Quaeryt nodded.

"How do you expect me to deal with Kharllon after what happened?" asked Skarpa, half humorously.

"Keep him in reserve until we reach Liantiago. Then have Fourteenth Regiment lead an attack." Quaeryt's tone was ironically dry.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"It doesn't hurt to have a heroic senior officer now and again."

“I would ask, wouldn’t I?”

“You’re in charge.”

“I wonder, at times, if any of us are truly in control. Or are we playthings in a vast game between the Namer and the Nameless?”

“Rholan wondered that as well. At least, he said that professing a great destiny was inviting the Namer and the Nameless to make one a plaque in a game.”

“Is that why you disclaim everything?” asked Skarpa.

“No.”

“Why then?”

“Most would not believe that what I seek is possible. Too many of the few who could see it is possible would do anything they could to stop it.”

“And what do you seek that is so dangerous?”

“Among other things, a fairer and more just world for those without power and privilege.”

“You’re right,” said Skarpa with a bark of laughter. “If the High Holders of Lydar believed you could bring that about, they’d line up with cannon and Antiagon Fire … for both you and Bhayar.”

And that’s just part of what I seek. “So I don’t say much, except that I’m a loyal supporter of Lord Bhayar.”

“What does Lord Bhayar think?”

“He knows I’m absolutely loyal.”

Skarpa nodded slowly. “Another reason why you gather enemies.”

“If it weren’t that, it’d be something else. There’s always something.”

“There is. Speaking of that, you might also suggest to Alazyn that Kharllon does carry grudges.”

“I already talked to him.”

“Good. How many attacks do you think the Antiagons will make before we reach the city?”

“As many as they think they can without great losses. I’d expect something tomorrow, from the hills, and maybe even a fortified position somewhere short of the city. The fortified position might be long on walls and Antiagon Fire and short on troopers.”

“To see what losses they can inflict without taking too many casualties.”

“That’s my thought. Has Kharllon offered any observations?”

“Of course not. He’s just expressed the utmost confidence in my ability to direct an attack on a city that’s supposedly never even been threatened, let alone taken.”

“Oh?”

“By his quiet silence and his obedience … not by anything else.” Skarpa snorted.

“I assume you want first company in the van tomorrow.”

“Where else?”

“We’ll be ready.” With a nod, Quaeryt slipped away, leaving Skarpa and his maps.

63

A quint past seventh glass on Mardi morning saw first company riding down the lane from the old and tired villas toward the gray stone of the road leading westward to the rugged hills-and Liantiago beyond. The sky was clearer than it had been in days, and a brisk and chill wind blew out of the northeast.

Just before first company turned onto the main road, Skarpa rode up and eased his mount in beside Quaeryt's mare. "The scouts haven't found any tracks at all."

"None? Not on the road or on the shoulders or the side lanes?"

"No." Skarpa offered a crooked smile. "They say that there's not even a place where the Antiagons could make an attack. I'd say that means an attack. They've removed all tracks, and a road without any tracks suggests it held many. I'd like to know just how many."

"That's what they don't want us to know. Is there any place where it's more obvious that the road has been swept clean or the shoulders smoothed?"

"The scouts didn't see any signs of that."

"That means that they've kept everyone off the road, at least for the last day or so." That suggested something to Quaeryt … something … but he couldn't pin it down.

"Just keep your eyes open and your imagers ready," said Skarpa, before turning his mount back to rejoin Third Regiment.

"Yes, sir."

The morning was still as first company rode eastward past the first of the irregular hills of a reddish sandstone, where, in places, small evergreens clung precariously to crevices in the stone. Those hills stood several hundred yards from the roadbed, but over the next half mille, the road curved and began to descend toward a pass apparently between two taller and more rugged sandstone hills.

As first company neared that gap, Quaeryt could see that the road descended straight into a gorge that had been widened, the reddish stone walls cut back at a forty-five degree angle and smoothly finished. On each side of the roadway was a comparatively wide shoulder, a good twenty yards between the low stone rain gutters at the edge of the pavement and the base of the sandstone slope that angled upward and for a good two hundred yards, although the rugged top of the hill was less than 150 yards above the roadbed and likely that far back from the road. The part of the road that followed the cut through the hillside was not that long, certainly no more than four hundred yards before the road reached a wider and more open valley descending toward the lowlands.

"Do you see anyone or anything?" he asked Zhelan, riding beside him.

"No, sir. I can't even see where anyone could hide."

Neither could Quaeryt, but the narrow section between the two stone slopes worried him, even though he couldn't see any place for an attacker to hide, especially given the steepness and openness of the flattened and smoothed sandstone walls.

As he rode closer and closer to the beginning of the gorge, Quaeryt kept glancing toward the upper side of the road cut on the south side, just ahead. He couldn't see anyone … or even any shadows. *No shadows! There have to be shadows with the sun to the south.*

"Company halt!"

Quaeryt concentrated, trying to image out a section of the slope below the area that held no shadows. Abruptly the smooth slope vanished, to reveal men and catapults stationed on a ledge cut behind a chest-high wall of the same sandstone. Immediately above was another shorter ledge and wall, behind which stood archers.

Quaeryt extended his shields, as he did ordering, "Imager shields!"

Simultaneously, arrows sleeted from the upper ledge down toward first company.

Pain hammered at Quaeryt's skull from the effort of holding shields and trying to gouge out a large chunk of the mountainside. Even as he watched, the reddish stone immediately below the ledge vanished, but only a thin line perhaps a yard wide and deep. Then the stone above that shivered and cracks began to form, widening and growing, and the lower ledge began to crumble.

For a moment Quaeryt just held his shields, trying to shield the company from the arrows, and to recover from the effort of trying to handle two imaging efforts at once. Then he saw that one of the catapults was already in motion. He immediately imaged away a support on the far side of the device. While he'd hoped that would have flung the Antiagon Fire along the ledge, instead it just dropped onto the ledge and exploded into the telltale crimson-yellow-green flame. Then the lower ledge crumbled, and Antiagon troopers flailed as they lost their footing and slid down the sandstone toward the base of the gorge … and the roadway below.

The archers on the upper ledge had begun to aim their shafts farther to the east, at the first companies of Third Regiment, well beyond the shields of first company.

Then … fire grenades appeared from somewhere else, exploding into flame against the imager shields.

"To the west! Behind those scrubby pines!" called out an

undercaptain-Voltyr, Quaeryt realized.

The scrubby pines to which Voltyr pointed hadn't been there a moment before-or, rather, they'd been concealed by an imaging shield of some sort, as had the Antiagons working the second set of catapults.

"Iron darts!" ordered Quaeryt, even as he concentrated on intercepting fire grenades and imaging them at the upper ledge and the archers there.

While some of the imagers managed darts, many of the Antiagons working on the fire grenade catapults ducked below the sandstone ledge wall before the Telaryn imagers could create the darts so that a handful of darts clunked against the soft stone, gouging shallow holes and spraying reddish sand.

A line of Antiagon Fire flared across the ledge holding the archers, and several jumped over the ends of the wall and tried to slide down the sandstone away from the rubble of the first ledge below them. One seemed to manage it, and immediately began to run down the road to the west. Another lost control and tumbled head over heels into an unmoving lump at the bottom of the gorge. Others skidded into the rugged rocks that filled the gouge beneath the first ledge that Quaeryt had destroyed.

Quaeryt returned his attention to the remaining catapults, where he did manage to return two or three of the fire grenades. Before long, Antiagon Fire was raging behind the ledge wall on the emplacement west of the pine trees.

Then Quaeryt saw a shower of rock cascading down from the north slope of the road cut … and above that a larger mass of stone breaking loose from somewhere.

Immediately he thought about drawing heat from somewhere to support his imaging-but there was nothing to draw from. The rock hadn't absorbed that much sunlight, and there was no water anywhere. Still … he concentrated on creating an angled wall into place, no more than a yard and a half high, running from the east to west as it descended along the northern sandstone slope. Waves of pain cascaded over him, and he doubled over in the saddle, with flashes of light burning into his skull.

All he could do was watch as the chunks of sandstone and other rock cascaded downslope toward his angled barrier.

The first and smaller rocks hit the wall and largely bounced westward, and downhill. So did most of what followed, but more than a few stray rocks and boulders bounced over the barrier and rolled or slid down into the gorge-building up next to the sandstone wall.

Dust followed, and when that began to clear, Quaeryt took a deep breath.

Most of the rocks and rubble had not reached the road. Even so,

there was a mass almost a yard high and twenty yards long covering the roadbed, beginning some fifteen yards ahead of where first company had stopped. Beyond that rubble Quaeryt could see several scouts and outriders, but he had no idea if all of them had escaped. He could only hope.

Even as a last skitter of rocks slid to a stop atop the pile of rock partially blocking the road, Quaeryt kept looking around, ignoring the pain and flashes in his vision, seeing yet another Antiagon defensive emplacement. Where the first walled ledge had been there was only an angular and blacked gash in the sloped sandstone, its base partly filled with boulders and fragments of sandstone, some blackened. Above that, the upper ledge was blackened and empty. Above the top of the gash, where the original ledge had been, Quaeryt saw an oblong opening, with what looked to be stairs behind it. *That's how they got there.*

He kept looking, but could see no sign of any surviving Antiagons. There were no more fire grenades and no more archers. Nor was there any sign of more rockslides. Had the one been triggered by an imager? Quaeryt had no way of knowing and even sending someone to the top of the gorge wall likely wouldn't reveal anything. Still … they probably needed to have a squad investigate the tunnels to the ledges and see what lay behind them.

"That was something."

Quaeryt turned in the saddle to see Skarpa rein up.

The submarshal looked at the mass of rubble covering the road, then at the blackened ledges, and finally at Quaeryt. "How did you know?"

"I didn't, not exactly. I just knew it had to be an attack that relied on something other than a mass of troopers. When I couldn't see shadows where there should have been shadows…"

Skarpa raised his eyebrows.

Quaeryt went on to explain, then said, "Then there was the attack outside of Barna. They used barely trained troopers. The first Antiagon Fire attack-that took an imager and no more than twenty troopers. And … Antiago is a smaller land that makes most of its wealth from trading. Traders don't like to spend any more than they have to. Antiago has never had to maintain that many troopers, and I doubt Aliaro has that many to spare. So … he won't hazard them until he has to. Also, the more he can weaken us without using his best, the more likely they'll be able to turn us away."

"That would be a victory of sorts for him. He has to know that we're not equipped for a long siege or attack on Liantiago."

"He knows that and so do we."

Skarpa gestured toward the remaining ledges cut into the soft

sandstone walls, ledges blacked and charred, with the remnants of Antiagons and catapults. “That’s almost an unassailable position.”

“They didn’t think about having their own Fire used against them.”

“Or your having imagers strong enough to cut away the stone under their feet.” Skarpa’s eyes went to the rubble beside and partially covering the road.

“The imagers can remove that, but you might want to send a company to investigate how the Antiagons got to those ledges.”

“I already have,” replied Skarpa. “I also told them to bring in anyone they capture.”

“That would help in knowing how many imagers they have and how good they are.”

“Do you think they used imagers to cut those ledges just for us?”

“I wondered that at first, but I don’t think so. They were likely imaged, but not recently. There are trees growing in places that suggest the ledges were created some time ago. Also there are rivulets and channels in the sandstone that were made by rain. All that takes time. They might have used imagers recently to improve the old ledges and walls.”

“How long will it take to clear this?”

“Less than two glasses, I’d judge, but we’ll have to see.”

“If you could make a narrow path first…”

“To get the scouts and a vanguard through? We can do that.” Quaeryt nodded.

Once Skarpa headed back to Third Regiment, Quaeryt turned to the undercaptains. “We’ve got some road-clearing to do. We’ll begin with a narrow path wide enough for a single mount.” He gestured. “Threkhyl … Horan … you two start. Remove the rocks and earth in smaller piles. There’s more to image away than meets the eye.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the two imagers began to image away rock and sand, Quaeryt looked westward and downhill, but he could not make out either the bay or Liantiago.

By the time the imagers had cleared the road, and the scouting parties had returned with but a handful of surviving Antiagon troopers, it was past noon before Southern Army emerged from the bottom of the gorge and began to ride along a section of the road that sloped down, if ever so gradually, toward a lower line of hills. Those hills, unlike the irregular sandstone hills, were green with spring grass and intermittent olive orchards. The villas were also larger, and Quaeryt could make out several hamlets, although all were on lanes back off the main paved road by at least a mille, if not more, and most seemed to be located on or near slopes that showed rocky

outcroppings, suggesting that where the common people built was controlled in some fashion, either by the Shahibs or the Autarch or even by a certain popular reluctance to be too close to the main road.

Before all that long, Skarpa rejoined Quaeryt, since first company remained as the vanguard.

"What did you discover from the captives?" asked Quaeryt.

"Not too much. Their commander sent two companies and two imagers. One company was of archers, and the other was of catapultists. Supposedly one imager was a master and the other his assistant. They were told to destroy the attackers and return." Skarpa snorted.

"Did they believe that was possible with so small a force?"

"Some did, it appears. That's not likely to happen again. At least a squad escaped with the master imager. You or your imagers got the assistant…"

That suggests that the master imager might have some sort of shields, thought Quaeryt.

"There's a hidden back trail down to the main road. One of the companies from second battalion found it, but the Antiagons were so far gone that even their dust had settled."

"So it's likely they know we have imagers, and the size of our force," said Quaeryt, "but not necessarily how many imagers. Did any of the captives know how many imagers there might be in Liantiago?"

"I did ask, but all they could tell me was that the imagers lived in special walled quarters inside the palace walls, and that only a few ever left Liantiago. None of them had ever seen more than two imagers together-almost always a master and his apprentice."

Quaeryt frowned. *Was that a form of dissimulation? Or did it represent how Antiagon imagers were trained?*

"You have that look…"

"A master and apprentice system…" Quaeryt shook his head. "That sounds too traditional … but maybe it's merely a pretense to avoid people asking too many questions."

"Does it matter?"

"Not for now," replied Quaeryt. *But it's something to look into, especially why the Autarch uses that system … if he even does.*

Skarpa, Quaeryt, and first company continued to lead the way along the well-kept paved road. After they had ridden another glass, they came to the crest of a low rise, beyond which were low rolling hills, covered with already green pastures or meadows, that extended from just below him to the outskirts of Liantiago some five milles away.

Skarpa called a halt, after which he and Quaeryt surveyed the terrain before them. Liantiago was located on the southeastern end of

a sheltered bay that extended more than a hundred milles from the Gulf of Khellor. In the center of the bay was the island of Westisle, itself some forty milles long and five to eight across. The size and sheltered nature of the bay provided the best port and anchorage in all of Lydar. All that Quaeryt recalled from his years at sea. What he didn't recall was the size of Liantiago, stretching as it did more than five milles along a curving shoreline. What he also did not recall was the imposing stone complex that dominated a low hill rising from the middle on the northern end of the city and overlooking the harbor. That had to be Aliaro's palace, what with its white stone walls and fortifications.

White stone? That suggested stone hardened and shaped by experienced and talented imagers. While it was clear that Aliaro had imagers, what Quaeryt and Skarpa had no way of knowing was how many the Autarch might have … or how accomplished they might be. The stone fortifications suggested both numbers and talent … but had the walls been built in the past … or more recently?

"Makes Variana and Solis look small," observed Skarpa.

"It does. It's also interesting that there aren't any other cities in Liantiago of any size."

"With one that size, why would the autarchs need any more?"

"The autarchs might not, but the traders and merchants and people might."

"Meaning what?" asked Skarpa.

"That the Autarch doesn't want too many people too far away from him, suggesting that he doesn't have that effective a government for controlling large groups of people at a distance. That might make matters easier for Bhayar to rule here."

"There's the small matter of defeating Aliaro's forces before we can consider that," said Skarpa dryly.

Quaeryt laughed lightly. "You're right about that."

64

Once below the gorge, the road that led to Liantiago through the remaining lower and gentler hills turned out to be wider. It was also paved in hard white stone and wide enough for three wagons abreast, with room to spare. Although the lines of the stone were sharp and clean, from the way the turf from which the hot-weather grasses sprouted had been cut back and from the occasional large mansions and small palaces set back from the road, each with elaborate gates-all closed-and paved lanes cut into the gentle hillside, it was clear that the road dated back some considerable time.

If not so far back as the roads of the Naedarans, thought Quaeryt. *Had some of the Naedarans fled to Antiago? Or had Aliaro's imagers come from elsewhere?*

While it was hard to determine, given their distance from the main road, most of the imposing structures appeared shuttered, and not a single wisp of smoke rose from any chimney, as if most inhabitants had either fled or were hiding within. Nor had Quaeryt seen any individual even on more distant lanes or fields. In fact, he had seen no livestock, not even a dog.

Just ahead of first company, the road curved gently to the north around the base of another hill, one planted at the top with oil nut trees. Some hundred yards to the south of the road was a depression not quite deep enough to be a gorge or a canyon but too narrow to be a valley and too deep to be a mere swale, at the bottom of which was a small stream. Quaeryt judged that the miniature canyon/valley was perhaps two hundred yards across and fifteen to twenty yards deep. *Just deep enough and steep enough to make it a barrier to any sort of maneuver.*

Even before the outriders reached the point where the road began to curve to the west-northwest, Skarpa rode up and ordered a halt, then eased his mount over beside Quaeryt. "About a mille ahead, at the top of a slight rise, between that hill and that valley to the south, there's a wall right across the road. The wall looks to be a half mille long. The stonework on each side of the road towers looks old. The wall between the towers looks new. The scouts report that there might be at least several regiments there."

"So they imaged a short section of wall between the towers?"

"Or they built it quickly," replied Skarpa sardonically.

"Is there any way to go around the wall?" asked Quaeryt.

"Either down through the valley or uphill through the oil nut trees. I imagine that they're ready to fire the trees themselves if we tried that."

"So why don't we fire the trees … and wait?"

"I'd thought about that, but … unless you or your imagers could do that, we'd likely lose a lot of men even trying to get close."

"I assume that there's no other easy or short way to get around the wall."

"I've had the scouts searching, but there's another gorge to the north…"

"So we'd have to retrace our way up the gorge that holds the main road and then find another road down to Liantiago?"

"If there is one," said Skarpa. "We didn't see any signs of main roads. There are likely farm roads or lanes, but they'll be narrow."

"And we might face another force if we attempted riding back up into the gorge. Or some other kind of trap."

"Even if we didn't, trying to reach Liantiago on back roads gives them more of an advantage."

"But not more than the advantage of fortifications," Quaeryt pointed out.

"I was hoping you and the imagers…"

"I'd have to look to see what might be possible."

"I thought you might. That's why I called a halt," said Skarpa. "You're not to do it by yourself with just a squad."

"I'll take Khalis and Horan."

"Not Voltyr?"

"You'll need him if anything happens while we're gone." Quaeryt turned to Zhelan. "Major … I'll need a squad to accompany me and two undercaptains on a scouting mission."

"Yes, sir. Third squad is ready."

"Thank you." Quaeryt looked back. "Undercaptains Khalis and Horan, forward!"

As Horan reined up beside Quaeryt, his face held a slightly puzzled expression, while Khalis offered a tentative smile.

Quaeryt ignored both expressions. "Once we near the curve in the road, Khalis, I want a concealment shield over the squad. If at any time you think you can't maintain it, let me know before that happens. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Horan … I want you to study the hill to the north and the valley to the south. I need to know whether you can remove a section of the hill wide enough for a battalion to ride along such a cut around the end of the wall. I'd also like your thoughts on a bridge across the valley short of the wall and another one back across farther west and behind the wall."

The older undercaptain nodded, thoughtfully, as if his unspoken question had been answered.

Quaeryt turned his mount slightly, in order to address all the imager undercaptains. “The Antiagons have imagers. We don’t know how many, and we don’t know how strong they are. We also don’t know how they will deploy those imagers after what we did in the gorge. They’ll doubtless have Antiagon Fire and catapults. They will have cannon as well.” He ignored the sarcastic expression on Threkhyl’s face. “Until we do know what else they may use, when we first move into range of muskets, arrows, or imaging, you need to hold your shields. It’s more than likely that the stone wall ahead is only the first barrier we’ll encounter as we near the outskirts of the city.”

By the time Quaeryt had finished speaking, third squad had ridden forward, ready to escort Quaeryt and the two undercaptains. Quaeryt turned the mare and eased her over to the squad leader. “I’d like two outriders, but only five yards in front of us.” That was to make sure that they stayed within the limits of Khalis’s concealment shield. “We’ll take this at a fast walk. The two undercaptains will flank me, and you’ll be immediately behind.”

“Yes, sir.”

In moments, the two rankers were leading the group out along the road.

After the first hundred or so yards, Quaeryt ordered, “Concealment shield now, Khalis. Third squad, quiet riding.”

“Yes, sir.”

Almost half a mille later, they came to the end of the curve in the road, and to a point almost even with the highest part of the low hill to the right. Some four hundred yards ahead was the stone wall that extended from the rear of the hill across the road and to the valley to the southwest. Even at that distance, Quaeryt could see that behind the stonework waited troopers in maroon uniforms. Some ten yards behind the stonework were catapults, spaced ten yards or so apart, with more than twenty of them in all.

Quaeryt didn’t see any cannon, but he had no doubt that there must have been some, possibly in the trees on the upper slopes of the hill, trained down onto the open fields on each side of the road and ready to rake the approaches to the wall. *Another reason to fire the trees before we start any sort of attack.*

He held up his hand. “Squad, halt.” Then he added, “Undercaptains, take a good look at all that.”

The towers immediately flanking the road were square, some ten yards high, and clearly dated back many years, possibly more than a century, as did the two sections of the wall on each side of the towers, a wall that looked to be some five yards thick. The wall between the towers had no gates, and not even embrasures below the crenellations that topped the stonework, and the white stone was definitely much

newer.

"Could you flatten that stonework for a width of thirty or forty yards?" Quaeryt asked Horan.

"Be easier to move some of the hill to make a ramp up and around the end of the wall, sir," Horan finally said.

"How wide do you think you could make it?"

"Wide enough for four horses, I'd think. If they stayed close together."

"What about bridges over the valley?"

"No, sir. I saw what all of you did at Ferravyl, and it'd take a lot more than that."

Quaeryt had thought the same, but had his reasons for asking. "And a ramp over the south end of the wall?"

"I could do the north end, and Threkhyl could do the south. He might be able to flatten the wall. He's still stronger than I am for that."

But not for shields, I'd wager. "Khalis … could you remove that center section of wall?"

"Yes, sir. That's less than twenty yards across. Well … less than thirty, anyway."

Quaeryt couldn't help but smile slightly, if ironically. A year and a half earlier, he couldn't have removed one of the wall stones. Now, that was nothing to all but one of the imagers he commanded. He nodded. "Time to head back, outriders, undercaptains, squad leader. Please keep holding that concealment, Khalis." He turned his mare.

"If I might ask," ventured Khalis, after they had covered about a hundred yards of the return to Southern Army, "what you have in mind, sir…"

"Anything where we don't have to attack a walled fortification directly. Do you have any suggestions, Undercaptain?" asked Quaeryt gently.

"If we just removed the front of the entire wall at the base, it wouldn't take as much effort…"

Quaeryt thought for a moment, then shook his head. "That would just leave a jumble of stone that would be a barrier to us, especially to a mounted regiment…" He let the words drift off for a moment, as something struck him. "Keep that thought in mind, though. It might be a very good tactic if we have to deal with manned high walls in Liantiago."

"What about toppling their catapults just before we get in range?" asked Horan. "We wouldn't need shields as much."

"It's a good idea, especially if it spreads Antiagon Fire across their ranks, but we'd still need shields against arrows and musket fire."

As they rode back around the curve, Quaeryt began to image

burning hunks of wax into the leaves of the oil nut trees on the hill to the north of the road, concentrating on the southern side, overlooking the approach to the wall and towers. Wax was easier than iron fragments, and he also had no idea exactly where any Antiagons might be … if there were any at all, but he couldn't believe that there were none on such a strategic position. He might be destroying the grove and the crop of some Shahib, but he didn't wish to risk Southern Army having to deal with either a concealed Antiagon force or a cannon position that could rake any advance. He kept looking up at the tree-covered crest of the hill as he rode back toward where Skarpa and Southern Army waited-out of sight of the wall and its towers, but certainly obvious to any scouts or troopers on the hill.

Initially, even a half a quint after Quaeryt's fire-imaging, there were only puffs of smoke here and there, and in many places, the smoke just vanished. In more than a handful, though, perhaps in as many as a double handful, the thin trails of smoke thickened, followed by tongues of flame that expanded rapidly. By the time that the scouting squad was back in sight of Southern Army, patches of the trees were in full flame. Quaeryt didn't see anyone fleeing the fire. *But you wouldn't. They'd run back toward the wall on the side of the hill away from us.*

Before long, the entire hilltop was aflame. Then, abruptly, a geyser of dirt and vegetation erupted from the upper southern side of the hill, accompanied by one large explosion and followed by several others.

For a moment Quaeryt just watched, although he kept riding.

"Why didn't they fire on us earlier?" asked Khalis. "We were certainly in range even before we went to scout."

"They weren't positioned to fire on where Southern Army halted, and I'd guess that because cannon are heavy and hard to move, they worried that they wouldn't have time to reposition them to cover the approach to the wall. That's where they could do the most damage because that's where our forces would be the closest together."

Skarpa was waiting at the front of first company and gestured for Quaeryt to join him. Quaeryt rode over and reined up.

"I appreciate your taking out that cannon emplacement. It did warn them about some of our capabilities, but they probably know those already." Skarpa's smile was rueful. "I don't see much point in waiting until tomorrow. They might just decide to bring up cannon or something else unpleasant." Skarpa coughed and cleared his throat. "And most of Southern Army hasn't fought today. Can your imagers handle it?"

"Here's what I'd suggest," said Quaeryt. He began to explain.

When he finished, Skarpa nodded slowly, then said, "That's fine if

they don't immediately turn cannon and catapults on the attack points."

"We can't do much against cannon, except use concealment shields until we begin the attack, but some of the imagers can cripple the catapult towers." Quaeryt paused. "I don't know that we can take them all out. They must have twenty of them along the wall."

"I'd think they'd have more. It is what they do best."

"They likely do in Liantiago, but here … there's no protected storage for the fire grenades, and you wouldn't want them too close together." *Not if you value your troopers.*

"That might be why they had the cannon on the hill. Some of the cannon, anyway," said Skarpa. "If I were their commander, I'd have more set back and ranged to fire over the walls into the approaches to the wall."

"Then they probably do, and we'll need to use concealment shields as long as we can and try to advance without raising enough dust that it lingers behind the regiments."

Skarpa gestured to a junior squad leader. "Commander Quaeryt and I would like to see all the regimental commanders immediately."

"Yes, sir."

Skarpa turned back to Quaeryt. "You can't do anything like you did at Ferravyl or Variana?"

Quaeryt shook his head. "It's not that warm. There's no rain and no water that near."

"I don't pretend to understand why that's important, but I'll take your word for it."

"Massive imaging takes heat."

"That's why all the ice and snow?"

Quaeryt nodded. "Without that…" He shook his head.

"The more I learn, the more I wouldn't want to be in your boots."

For those reasons, and for others Quaeryt wasn't about to mention, he was getting more and more uncomfortable in his own boots.

Once the seven commanders arrived, Skarpa laid out the plan of attack, looking around the senior officers when he had finished.

"You realize that coordinating the attack will be difficult using hand signals instead of horn signals," offered Kharllon.

"I do understand that, Commander," replied Skarpa, "but it is not necessary for the attacks to be perfectly coordinated. A surprise attack on three points that is not exactly timed is far better than a perfectly timed assault that is anticipated and expected. Would you not agree?"

"Do we have any idea what defenses they have besides the wall?" asked Kharllon, his question making clear the fact that he didn't intend to reply to Skarpa's gentle question.

"Some twenty catapults armed with Antiagon Fire grenades, most likely one or two cannon emplacements, and an undetermined number of troopers," replied Skarpa. "Probably at least three regiments. They have far less experience than your men."

"How do we know that?" asked Meurn, after looking to Kharllon.

"They haven't fought anyone in generations," replied Quaeryt. "Even if they're well trained, it's not the same."

Subcommander Dulaek cleared his throat. "Are we to give quarter?"

"To those who throw down their weapons and surrender immediately," replied Skarpa. "We're not interested in slaughtering if it's not necessary."

While Quaeryt nodded, he thought, *One way or another, that's not likely to be an issue, not with as much Antiagon Fire behind those walls as needed by that number of catapults.*

After several more questions, Skarpa released the commanders to their regiments. Quaeryt remounted the mare and rode back to the imager undercaptains, accompanied by Alazyn, who had said nothing during the senior officers' briefing.

"You didn't look all that pleased with Commander Kharllon's questions," observed Quaeryt, his eyes on the subcommander.

"He was asking questions so he could cover his back if things go wrong."

"Another reason why we need to make certain they don't." *It's also why Skarpa has him leading one of the attacks.*

Once he returned to first company, Quaeryt quickly briefed Zhelan, Ghaelyn, and the undercaptains. "The attack will begin with three separate assaults, each under concealment. Lhandor and Threkhyl, you'll be with the submarshal and Commander Fhaen. Voltyr and Horan with Fourteenth Regiment and Commander Kharllon, and Khalis, Baelthm, and I will support Subcommander Alazyn and Nineteenth Regiment…" He went on with the overall plan before discussing certain details.

"Voltyr … you need to stay close enough to Commander Kharllon to make certain that nothing slows the attack or goes wrong with it."

"And remove any unforeseen impediments?"

"If necessary … but only if necessary. You should be able to handle the concealment, and Horan should be able to create a causeway wide enough for Fourteenth Regiment to swing north of the defenders and attack their rear. If you see a cannon emplacement … do what you can. You're likely to be the one close enough and with the best view for that."

"Yes, sir." Voltyr nodded slowly.

"Good. You and Horan head out and join Fourteenth Regiment."

Quaeryt then went over his instructions with Threkhyl and Lhandor before sending them to join Skarpa. Then he turned to Khalis. "You're going to have to remove as large a section of that wall as you can … but leave yourself enough strength to deal with the catapults."

"Yes, sir."

Almost two quints passed before Fourteenth, Nineteenth, and Third Regiments were in position to ride forward. Because maintaining concealment during the entire set of maneuvers would have been far too hard on all the imagers, once Fourteenth Regiment was in place, Paedn's Fourth Regiment moved up behind it, as did Meurn's Fifteenth behind Quaeryt and Nineteenth Regiment, and Dulaek's Sixth Regiment behind Skarpa and Fhaen's Third Regiment. Fhaasn's Twenty-sixth Foot was behind Fifteenth, but to the west of the road. The three lead regiments were a good half mille from the wall, with their backups separated from them by several hundred yards. Once the lead regiments had reached a point several hundred yards from the wall, the backup forces were to begin their advance, again in an angled fashion.

On Skarpa's signal, Khalis raised a concealment shield over the first company and Nineteenth Regiment, as did Voltyr over Fourteenth Regiment, and finally Lhandor over Third Regiment. Quaeryt thought it most likely that most, if not all, Antiagon observers would be puzzled by the concealment because they would still observe regiments in the same general position as before, if fewer in number, and might even think that the larger initial numbers were an imaging illusion. Even if the Antiagon commander did not happen to be deceived, the concealment would make it difficult to determine where the attackers were and what their movements were.

"Forward," ordered Quaeryt quietly, raising and then lowering his arm.

First company began to walk their mounts toward the central section of the wall, but at an angle, since Quaeryt and Skarpa had positioned all the regiments, not directly in front of their objective, but so that they would not move directly forward toward the wall. That way, if there were cannon or, as they neared the wall, other missiles, the defenders could not attempt merely to adjust the distance in trying to calculate where the Southern Army regiments might be. Further, since there were wide spaces between the regiments, any blanket barrage would waste a great deal of ammunition.

Of course, if they drop something directly blindly into a regiment, the casualties will be higher, or the strain on the imager will be greater … if not both. Again, Quaeryt was basing his tactics on the fact that no one in Lydar had ever used imagers the way he was-at least not since the time of the Naedarans, if then-and they hadn't had muskets, cannon,

or Antiagon Fire.

First company and Nineteenth Regiment had advanced less than two hundred yards before what sounded almost like a sighing whistle passed overhead. Although Quaeryt couldn't see it, the *crumpt* well behind Nineteenth Regiment told Quaeryt all that he needed to know. "Forward! Fast trot!" As he gave the order, he extended shields across the front of first company, trusting that he could hold them at least until they reached a point close to the walls … or where Khalis would remove the stone.

More explosions echoed across the fields before the walls, but behind Nineteenth Regiment, demonstrating that the Antiagons not only had cannon emplacements, but that there were more than a few handfuls of cannon in those positions. From what Quaeryt could tell, most of the impact explosions occurred well to the south behind the advancing forces, but he hoped that the reserve battalions followed Skarpa's orders and had moved quickly-at an angle-once they came under fire. *Not that you can do anything about that now.*

As he rode toward the highway just in front of the gate, Quaeryt took a quick look at the two towers, but only saw a handful of troopers behind the crenellations of each tower. None of the nearer catapults appeared to be in motion, either. Could it be that the Antiagons were still concentrating on the secondary regiments? He pushed that thought away.

At that moment, from nowhere came a series of blows on Quaeryt's shields, strong enough to rock him in the saddle. Dropping away from his shields were iron darts-all aimed at the front ranks of first company-and that meant an imager on the walls who had deduced where first company happened to be.

"Image now!" Quaeryt ordered Khalis, before glancing back over his shoulder to make certain that Baelthm was close behind him.

Khalis said nothing, but in moments the section of wall between the towers flanking the stone-paved high had vanished-and reappeared as a flat paved square extending a good forty yards back. That newly created square was empty, except for wisps of mist curling up from the stone-a good indication that whatever forces had manned the wall or sheltered behind it were now entombed under it.

"Forward! Through the wall!" ordered Quaeryt.

First company and the first battalions of Nineteenth Regiment were through the gap in the white stonework, the hooves of their mounts clattering on the cold white paving that Khalis had laid down, before any of the defenders flanking the towers even began to react. At that point, Quaeryt dropped the concealment and strengthened his shields.

The appearance of riders amid the defenders engendered shouts,

but whether those were of defiance or surprise Quaeryt certainly couldn't tell.

"First company! On me!" He turned the mare toward the defenders on the left, shifting his half-staff to his right hand. "Baelthm! Do what you can to the nearest catapult." After narrowing his personal shields to a wedge extending little more than the width of two horses, he urged the mare to move faster.

Even before the troopers turned toward the Southern Army troopers, from nowhere came another series of blows on Quaeryt's shields, again powerful enough to push him back in the saddle. Quaeryt had no idea from where they had come, but the sooner his troopers were close to the Antiagons, the harder it would be for Antiagon imagers to attack the Telaryn troopers.

Behind him, he heard Alazyn's command. "First battalion on the commander. Second to the right on me!"

Whatever imaging Baelthm did was sufficient, because the launching arm of the nearer catapult sagged, and a fire grenade exploded as the arm fell, with crimson-yellow-green flames oozing down the framework.

Quaeryt imaged a few handfuls of red-hot iron fragments into what looked to be the magazine for the catapult. In instants, flames roared up the catapult, and Antiagon troopers raced away from the flaming structure.

Another blast of *something* washed over his shields, and this time, Quaeryt attempted to image it back from wherever it had come.

Another wave of flame flared to Quaeryt's left, from narrow embrasures in the middle level of the western road tower … followed by a quick gust of cool air.

Quaeryt braced for another imaging attack … but there was none.

Ahead, the flames from the burning catapult or from the midsection of the tower didn't deter many of the defenders, who resolutely turned to face Quaeryt and first company. That resolution helped them little when his shields, loosely anchored to the mare and the other mounts of first company, thrust the defenders facing Quaeryt to one side or the other, unbalanced, and easy targets for Zhelan and his men.

A group of archers stood on the parapet of the wall ahead, beginning to fire shafts into the riders well behind Quaeryt.

Quaeryt imaged iron darts across the archers, and most of them went down. A flash of light momentarily blinded him so that all he could do was hold his seat as the mare charged forward through more defenders.

When his vision cleared, he found that the troopers of first company, and Khalis and Baelthm, had caught up with him, and that

most of the nearby defenders were falling back, if not outright fleeing.

Farther ahead on the parapets stood another group of archers, whose shafts arched toward him and first company, but before most of them could release another shaft, iron darts were penetrating their necks.

Quaeryt glanced to Khalis, whose face was momentarily locked in concentration before relaxing slightly. "Good job!"

"We don't need casualties behind us, sir."

No, we don't. Quaeryt nodded, then scanned the area. Another catapult was turning toward the attackers. He imaged away the rear support and directed the fire grenade downward into the areas below. He must have missed the wood or the magazine, because nothing happened, except for the fact that the crew immediately fled. He looked farther to the west-southwest, concentrating on the next catapult, but not before the weapon had released another fire grenade. All Quaeryt could do was to image it onto the Antiagon troopers on the wall farther from him and first company … and ignore the flames and agony as he kept riding through the thinning ranks of the defenders and strewing them sideways and into the sabres of the lead ranks of first company.

Before that long, there were no defenders-and no working catapults-remaining close to first company, except the wounded and the dead, but he could see a mass of them farther to the southwest, still resisting Skarpa's attack through a gap in the wall-a gap that only looked to be some twenty yards wide.

"First company! First battalion! Forward!" Once more Quaeryt urged the mare forward, hoping that a rear attack on the Antiagons might break the will of the defenders ferociously blocking the Telaryn advance through the gap in the white stone wall.

As he rode forward, he imaged away the supports on the nearest catapult ahead, and then the one after that, but at the same time, he couldn't help but think that either Threkhyl or Lhandor should have done some imaging ahead of Third Regiment, anything to put a gap in the defenders. *But maybe they couldn't.*

Only the last few ranks of the defenders attempting to stop Third Regiment's advance saw or heard the approach of first company and Nineteenth Regiment's first battalion, even though a squad leader on the wall was shouting and gesturing-until Quaeryt cut him down with an imaged iron dart.

More flashes of light across Quaeryt's eyes persuaded him to reduce his shields and just concentrate on the area around him-especially in case there was another Antiagon imager around.

After perhaps half a quint, the remaining defenders caught between Third and Nineteenth Regiments began to break. Then … in

what seemed moments, most were gone, and Quaeryt gestured and ordered, “Company! Halt!” That was to avoid riding into the advancing riders from Third Regiment.

“Sir! There!” shouted Khalis, pointing to the wall and an unroofed space that had chest-high walls on each side but was unwalled on the side away from the main wall.

Quaeryt jerked his head around. Two figures stood there, one apparently an officer and the other an older gray-haired man in a white jacket and maroon cuffs. To one side, lying on the parapet stones, was another white-jacketed figure.

The sharp-faced officer whirled toward the older man in the white jacket and the maroon cuffs, his blade clearly aimed at the man’s neck. Quaeryt imaged the blade from the hilt. The officer looked stunned, but only for a moment as an iron dart from Khalis caught him on the back of the neck.

The older man glanced from the falling officer in the general direction of Quaeryt, his eyes widening, although he appeared not to be looking at the commander or Khalis. Then a gold disk appeared in his hand … and he swayed. He mouthed several words-words that, to Quaeryt, might have been “never to the ancients”-before he pitched forward onto the stone, and then toppled off the parapet to the stone pavement that extended several yards back from the base of the wall.

Before Quaeryt could say anything or ride forward, two massive explosions, one right after the other, filled the air, clearly coming from somewhere north of the eastern end of the wall. Quaeryt turned in the saddle, but all he could see were two pillars of thick smoke. *Powder bags or cannonballs … or both?* He stood in the stirrups, looking back to the northeast, trying to see what had happened there, but from what he could determine, the fighting around the wall had ended there as well and since no troopers in maroon were headed toward them, and the uniforms he could see were greenish, that meant that Kharllon had been successful … and that the fighting had ended possibly even sooner than it had for Nineteenth and Third Regiments. That suggested that either Volytr or Horan had torched the cannon emplacements, and that Kharllon would find a way to inflate his success, sooner or later. In any case, Fourteenth and Fourth Regiments looked to be in control, and he’d find out soon enough what had happened.

“What was that?” asked Khalis, easing his mount up beside Quaeryt.

“Let’s hope it was Voltyr setting off Antiagon powder.”

“No … the two fighting on the wall here, and the one who jumped off.”

“He didn’t jump. He was an imager. He imaged the gold to kill

himself."

"You can do that?"

"You can." Quaeryt didn't remind Khalis that he'd pointed that out months before. "That's why imaging golds is dangerous."

"But why did he do it?"

Quaeryt shook his head. "The officer didn't want him taken captive, and he apparently didn't want it, either."

"That doesn't make sense."

Quaeryt was all too afraid that it did. He looked around for Zhelan, finally spotting the major some twenty yards away, giving orders to a squad leader. While he waited for Zhelan to finish, he decided to repeat a few things to Khalis. "Gold is one of the heaviest metals and one of the hardest to image…"

When Zhelan had finished, Quaeryt cut short his impromptu homily and rode over and reined up short of the major.

"Sir?"

"If there are any captives wearing white uniforms with maroon cuffs, I want to see them immediately. But have the men be careful with them. Some might be imagers."

The major's eyebrows lifted.

"That's a guess on my part, but one of the imagers was wearing that kind of uniform." Quaeryt gestured back toward the body on the stone pavement. "He killed himself, rather than let himself be captured."

Zhelan shook his head.

"I won't keep you. I imagine the submarshal will be here before long." Quaeryt nodded and eased the mare back to where Khalis and Baelthm waited, easing out his water bottle and hoping that the watered lager would help his throbbing head and various aches he hadn't realized that he had.

He still wondered why Threkhyl hadn't been able to image a larger gap in the Antiagon stonework.

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As Quaeryt waited for reports from Alazyn and Zhelan, he surveyed the battlefield, trying to determine exactly what the Antiagon strategy had been, yet so far as he could determine, the Antiagon commander had apparently decided that a strong stone wall, imagers, and Antiagon Fire and cannon could turn away Southern Army. *And they could have, except for our imaging.* Was that what had happened to the Naedarans? That they lost, one way or another, enough imagers that they could no longer maintain their power? *Can you make that point, convincingly enough, to Bhayar?*

Alazyn rode toward Quaeryt and reined up, putting an end to Quaeryt's reflections and concerns.

"How bad was it?" asked Quaeryt.

"Not so bad as it could have been. A hundred twenty dead, two hundred seventy one wounded, and we'll likely lose half of them-third company in fourth battalion got hit with three fire grenades at once."

Quaeryt winced. Fourth battalion had turned to the northeast after going through the gap in the wall, and there hadn't been any imagers to bring down those catapults. *You only have so many imagers,* he reminded himself.

"Could have been worse, except one of the imagers with Fourteenth Regiment brought down the other catapults."

"Voltyr, most likely. Were there many casualties after that?"

"Not for us. Some of the foot regiments lost men until the Fourteenth Regiment got the cannon."

"Are there many prisoners?"

Alazyn shook his head. "There were two kinds of Antiagon troopers. Some fought well, and most of them died. The others fled well, and it didn't make sense to chase after them. We didn't pick up many mounts, either. Most of their troopers were foot. No musketeers, though."

"We haven't seen one musketeer here."

"Wonder what the Antiagons have against them?" asked Alazyn.

Quaeryt had no idea, even though he'd puzzled over the lack of musketeers earlier. "It can't be that they don't know how."

"We don't have many, either," Alazyn pointed out.

"Lord Bhayar decided against fielding musketeers for several reasons. First, they slow down most regiments. Second, they weren't much good in Tilbor. And third, each musket has to be forged separately because the barrels burst if they're cast, and forging enough muskets to make a difference would have reduced the number of regiments he could have raised." Quaeryt was actually guessing at the

third reason, but Bhayar had talked about the first two, even before he'd sent Quaeryt to Tilbor.

"Won't always be like that," suggested Alazyn.

"No," said Quaeryt with a laugh. "That's why we have to get Lydar unified now."

"Do you really think we can do it?"

"I think we have to try." Quaeryt paused. "Don't you?"

After a moment the subcommander nodded. "If you don't need more from me, sir…"

"Go…" said Quaeryt.

No sooner had Alazyn ridden away than Zhelan rode up, accompanied by a squad. Riding beside him, rather thoroughly wrapped in chains, was an Antiagon trooper-or rather, Quaeryt suspected from the white jacket and the youthful face, an apprentice imager, with a large bruise across his forehead.

"I sent squads up and down the wall, sir," said Zhelan after he reined up. "They found seven bodies wearing those white uniforms. Four were older men, and three were much younger. There was one youngster in white. He'd been knocked out, and we wrapped him in chains before he woke."

"Where did you find chains?"

"Around the catapults. They must have chained slaves to them."

The more Quaeryt found out about Antiago, the less he liked what he was discovering.

The major gestured. "He won't talk to us."

Quaeryt turned in the saddle, and image-projected his voice. "Undercaptain Khalis!" Then he looked back to Zhelan. "We'll see what we can do."

Khalis immediately rode over from where he had been waiting with first squad. As he reined up, the black-haired youth in the white jacket with the maroon cuffs looked at Quaeryt. His eyes widened as he took in Quaeryt's silver white hair and eyebrows. Then he shuddered, but the shudder passed, and his eyes came to rest on Khalis. An expression, half puzzled, half quizzical, crossed his honey-shaded face.

"Talk to him," murmured Quaeryt.

Although Quaeryt had not directed Khalis to speak in Pharsi, the undercaptain did so.

The Antiagon imager's face expressed surprise, but he did reply, if in only a few words.

Khalis spoke again, and the Antiagon studied Quaeryt, then looked away.

"Ask him about why that officer tried to kill the older imager here," prompted Quaeryt.

Khalis spoke again in Pharsi, and the younger imager replied.

"He says that the life of any imager or apprentice who tries to leave Aliaro's service is forfeit. So is that of all members of their family."

"So why is he alive?"

Khalis spoke again and listened. "He's not a very good imager, and he's an orphan. He was assigned to the most difficult master."

"So he actually learned something?" Quaeryt let a little sardonicism permeate his voice.

Khalis offered a faint smile before speaking once more.

"He believes so, but you would have to judge."

"Not at the moment. Right now, we'll need to restrain him, but he doesn't need to be wrapped in chains." Quaeryt rode closer to the young imager and unwound some of the chains around his arm and right hand, then concentrated on imaging an iron wristband with an attached shackle, and then imaged one of the lengths of chain to the shackle. Lights flashed before his eyes, and he felt light-headed by the time he finished.

The Antiagon apprentice paled and began to shake. Finally, he spoke to Khalis.

"What did he say?" Quaeryt paused, then took another swallow of the watered lager.

"That you have proved to be his master, and the chain is unnecessary."

That didn't make sense to Quaeryt. At least one of the Antiagon imagers had been able to create iron darts and direct them at first company.

"Only the masters can image iron like that," added Khalis.

"Do you think you can handle him?" asked Quaeryt. "I'd like to see if we could eventually use him."

"I can see," replied Khalis. "Right now, he's just scared."

"Try to keep him respectful and worried without making him piss himself." Quaeryt glanced up to see Threkhyl and Lhandor riding toward him. "What's his name?"

When Khalis asked, the response was "Elsior."

"Just wait over there. I need to talk to Threkhyl and Lhandor."

"Yes, sir," replied Khalis.

"Will you need anything more, sir?" asked Zhelan quietly, as if not wishing to interrupt, but wanting to call attention to his other duties.

"I'm sorry to have kept you, Major. Not at the moment."

As Zhelan rode off, Quaeryt waited until the two arriving imagers reined up before speaking. "Threkhyl … you seemed to have trouble imaging a wide gap in the wall. What happened?"

"That was as wide as we could make it, sir." Threkhyl's tone was almost belligerent. "Took the two of us."

Lhandor looked to Quaeryt. "I had to drop the concealment early to help Threkhyl. It was like there was metal or something inside the stone. Then, all of a sudden it was gone."

An imager, trying to use shields to protect the wall? Quaeryt frowned, then asked, "Could it have been shielded somehow?"

Lhandor tilted his head slightly, as if considering. "It might have been. I've never tried to image through someone's shields. It might have been easier after we broke through, but … well … I couldn't image more."

Threkhyl shook his head. "Me neither."

"Against shields, you did well." Quaeryt saw Skarpa riding toward him. "We need to talk about this later, but I need to discuss some matters with the submarshal. Don't forget to drink a lot of watered ale or lager and eat some biscuits. That will help you recover your strength. If you'd join Khalis and his friend over there. He can fill you in."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt managed another swallow of watered lager and a few bites of a hard biscuit before Skarpa arrived, escorted by a half squad from Third Regiment, all of whom reined up well away from the two senior officers.

"It was a good thing you could attack the rear here," said Skarpa. "The gap in the wall wasn't wide enough to get enough troopers through quickly enough. When you attacked from the rear, a lot of them panicked, and we could break through."

"I'm just glad I saw it in time," replied Quaeryt.

"You're good about that." Skarpa paused. "They had more than five regiments here…"

"And several master imagers and apprentices, from what we've discovered."

"One junior imager for each senior one?"

"I'd guess so … at least in the field. We captured one…" Quaeryt went on to explain what had happened. "… and for the moment, he's over there with Khalis."

"Are you going to try to recruit him?"

"If we can. Since he hasn't seen much kindness, and since his life is forfeit in Antiago, there just might be a chance."

"You're an opportunist in everything, Quaeryt."

"When it makes sense."

Skarpa laughed. "You have a way of assuring that."

"Not always." Quaeryt couldn't help thinking about how matters hadn't worked out for him and Vaelora in Extela. *But they've worked*

out better for the people. He had to remember that, not that anyone else besides Vaelora would. *And Bhayar … perhaps.*

"I still don't understand why the Antiagons waited so long to use their cannon," mused Skarpa.

"When was the last time they actually fought a war-on the ground?" asked Quaeryt, not quite rhetorically.

"You're the scholar. You tell me."

"A real war? I'm not sure they ever have. There were some skirmishes along the Lohan Hills in the time of Bhayar's great grandsire. I'd be willing to wager they've never had that many armsmen, and most of them have probably been used as naval marines. Who really ever wanted to attack the place against Antiagon Fire?"

"You do."

"It's only as part of a greater goal, and I'm wagering that it will cost far less than trying to use force to take Khel." *And that's an enormous wager …* So enormous that Quaeryt didn't even want to dwell on it, even in his mind.

"It would take someone like you and a ruler like Bhayar…"

Quaeryt said nothing.

Skarpa shook his head. "I need to see Kharllon."

"Do you want to ride on this afternoon?"

"I'll let you know."

"Yes, sir."

After Skarpa left, Quaeryt was about to ride east along the wall in search of Voltyr and Horan when he caught sight of the pair riding toward him. As they neared, and then reined up, he could see that both looked exhausted.

"Are you two all right? I was getting concerned that one or both of you might have been hurt when the cannon emplacement went up."

"We're fine." Voltyr offered a disgusted expression. "I had to suggest to Commander Kharllon that the submarshal would be less than pleased if we didn't return as directed to first company."

"The implication being that he was the senior commander and his commands were to be obeyed over mine."

"Almost wasn't an implication," growled Horan. "Begging your pardon, sir, but Commander Kharllon makes the most ornery jackass I ever had look reasonable. Except he does it with greasy words."

Quaeryt decided not to address that. "Did you run into problems with the wall?"

"Couldn't do a thing with the wall at first, not until I imaged a bunch of dirt on the end of it next to the hill. Felt like someone was shielding it. Just guessed where he was standing and dropped big rocks on him. Needed some help from Voltyr to finish the cut through

the hill."

"Threkhyl and Lhandor had some difficulty at the other end, too." If Aliaro had even stronger imagers in Liantiago, Horan's suggestion about undermining the walls, perhaps below the shields of those imagers, might be the only way to deal with fortifications. *You'll just have to see.* "Did you ever see the imager? They wear white uniforms with maroon cuffs."

Voltyr nodded, as if that confirmed a suspicion. "Four … well … sort of. The two on the wall … their shields held for a bit … so they were only half buried."

"Or stoned," said Horan, with a hoarse laugh.

"That makes four, plus their apprentices," said Quaeryt. He turned and gestured. "Undercaptains! On me! Khalis, bring Elsior, too." He waited for a time, until all the undercaptains were facing him, mounted in a semicircle.

"All of you did well. Extraordinarily well. This is the first full battle we've had where there were other imagers. Four from what we can tell, all with apprentices." Quaeryt gestured toward the captive. "Elsior is the only one who survived. He wasn't that well treated, and he didn't kill himself like some of the others who seemed to think we're evil ancients from history." He looked to Khalis. "Has he said anything about that."

"No, sir. Not about that."

"We'll go over that later." From the way Khalis had phrased his answer, Quaeryt could sense that he had more to say, but not before the other undercaptains. "Now … we all had difficulty dealing with the imagers we faced. It's likely that those defending Liantiago will be at least as strong, if not stronger, and we may not be able to overcome their defenses so easily. I'll be talking with each of you individually to learn exactly how you dealt with the imagers here, and to go over possible other ways of dealing with them." He paused. "Is there anything any of you think we all should know?"

Voltyr cleared his throat. "Some of the men working the catapults were chained to them. That was where we were."

"We saw the same thing in the middle of the wall and at the west end," Quaeryt replied. "It may happen again, but we can't afford to leave the catapults alone."

"No, sir," agreed Voltyr. "I guess what I'm saying is that I don't like what I'm seeing here in Antiago."

Khalis, Horan, and Lhandor nodded. So did Baelthm, if almost surreptitiously, while Threkhyl snorted.

"Anything else?"

"Do you know what the submarshal has in mind?"

"He said he'd let us know shortly." Quaeryt offered a rueful smile.

“Try and rest a bit, and drink some more watered ale or lager and get something to eat. I’ll start going over things with Undercaptain Voltyr.”

Almost a glass passed before Quaeryt finished talking to all the undercaptains except for Khalis, whom he’d saved for last. While all could supply details to what Quaeryt had seen and deduced, none supplied any real additional information about the Antiagon imagers or the tactics and strategy adopted by the defenders.

Quaeryt couldn’t help but wonder what Khalis might have found out in talking to the captive apprentice imager. “What have you learned from Elsior?”

“He does speak Bovarian … or Antiagon, I guess you’d call it, as well as Pharsi, but his accent is so strong that it’s hard to understand. For me, Pharsi is easier. He’s also scared of you. He hasn’t taken his eyes off you the whole time.”

“Most of you could do what I did-that he saw, anyway.”

“I told him that. I even imaged an iron loop to prove it. That upset him, but not as much as you did.”

“What else?”

“You were right about one apprentice to each master. They’re assigned to a master when they’re fourteen.”

“Do they learn from other masters?”

“Not often. Sometimes, if there’s a skill one master has that the others don’t, they’ll let him teach a few other apprentices, but not all.”

“Just so the knowledge of that skill doesn’t disappear,” said Quaeryt. “How long has Elsior been an apprentice?”

“Less than a year.”

“Does he know how many imagers there are in Liantiago?”

“Not exactly. The Autarch never lets them meet as a group. He’s only seen eleven masters that he knows about.”

“If that’s all Aliaro has, that means he’s got about as many left as we have.” *Maybe not even as many, but that’s hardly likely.*

“Begging your pardon, sir, but shouldn’t he have more?”

“I’d be surprised if he doesn’t have more, but not too many more. There aren’t many imagers born, and Telaryn is twice the size of Antiago and probably has four or five times the people, if not more. Also, there are more imagers born to those of Pharsi ancestry, and I don’t think there are that many Pharsi in Antiago … at least not outside the capital. Did you find out anything more about the defenses or what the imagers might do in Liantiago?”

“He said he doesn’t know, except that the walls around the palace are high and thick and that the stone has been hardened over the years. They kept him away from the imagers who are assigned to the palace…”

“The imagers they sent out here were the ones they trusted least?”

“I don’t know,” replied Khalis. “He didn’t say anything like that.”

“Are there other walls or defenses in Liantiago? Besides those around the palace?”

“No … he said that the city has no walls except around the palace. Some of the villas of the wealthy Shahibs have walls, though.”

Another half glass passed before Quaeryt finished talking to Khalis-and having him ask more questions of Elsior-but he didn’t learn much more. That didn’t surprise him.

66

In the end, on Meredi afternoon, after the battle over the wall across the road into Liantiago, Skarpa had Southern Army advance into the western edge of the city proper, where his forces took over two adjoining walled villas that provided some barriers to the attacks he and Quaeryt anticipated, but which never occurred.

Quaeryt took a small room on the main level of the small villa, but while he slept soundly, he woke just before dawn with a jolt. He washed and dressed quickly, conferred briefly with Zhelan, told the imager undercaptains to get ready to move out, and then went looking for Skarpa. He found the submarshal in the study of the larger villa, studying a map laid out on a whitewood conference table that matched the elegantly carved desk, the chairs upholstered in a green velvet, and the settee before the built-in whitewood bookcases. Each corner of the map was weighted down with a leatherbound book, one of which looked older, to Quaeryt, than anything he'd seen in the scholarium in Solis, reminding him, again, that he really needed to replace the book he'd borrowed and lost in the shipwreck, although the replacement would have to be with a different volume, since he doubted that another copy of the one he had lost existed.

"What are you thinking?" asked Skarpa.

"About a lost book." Quaeryt shook his head. "It's a long story. Some other time. And you?"

"I'm worried," Skarpa said bluntly, brushing back hair that seemed grayer than Quaeryt recalled.

"Why?"

"Because the scouts haven't discovered a single barrier on the avenue leading north to the palace. There are no troopers anywhere in sight in the city, and every house and shop between us and the palace is shuttered and abandoned. We settled in here last evening, and by midnight, everyone was gone. There hasn't been a single Antiagon scout seen, and there's no sign of any troopers anywhere but inside the walls of the palace complex."

"What about the rest of the city?"

"We haven't checked more than a mille or two, except toward the harbor. Everything's closed and shuttered, but there are traces of people farther away, just not within a mille or so of the palace."

"You're suggesting that Aliaro has weapons that will destroy this entire quarter of Liantiago … and us with it. And that someone warned the people … or they know that."

Skarpa barked a laugh. "He must have said he does, and maybe he does. The thing is … the scouts also reported that no one has left

the palace complex, and there are more walls and more catapults behind those walls this morning."

"So he had imagers building walls last night, and that means he has imagers to spare…" Quaeryt paused. "It all could be a bluff."

"He hasn't sent us a warning or anything like that. That's one thing that makes me think it's anything but a bluff."

Quaeryt nodded. "He didn't send any messages when he shelled Ephra after Rex Kharst attacked the harbor at Kephria."

Skarpa stood and gestured at the map before him on the table. "The scouts-and my own eyes-tell me that the map is accurate. Accurate enough for us, anyway." He pointed. "The palace is in the center of this square. It's called the Square of the Autarch."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

"I didn't think it would. By the way, each side is about fifteen hundred yards long. There is a low wall, two yards high, around the square. Where there were gates there's now solid stone. The north wall of the square is fifty yards from a sheer cliff, and the hill is sculpted to be hard to climb. Looks like one of the autarchs had imagers carve the hill that way. It's too far from the palace for archers and too close for cannon, even if we had them."

Quaeryt took several moments to study the map. "The gardens are all in the rear of the palace it looks like."

"There are at least three separate gardens, all separated by walls three to four yards high. With all the ponds and pools and walls, trying to get to the palace from the rear…"

"Wouldn't be a good idea."

"What would be a good idea?" Skarpa looked at Quaeryt.

"Not trying to attack the palace at all, but getting close enough to bring it down on Aliaro's crown."

"What if he's not there?"

"Where else would he be? Your scouts haven't seen any large bodies of men leaving. The harbor's been empty for the last two days, and they couldn't have pulled out everyone who's in the palace. The earlier battles showed that they can't match us on open ground or in the field. So they're going to concentrate their forces and make us come to them. I told you earlier. They know that until we take Liantiago, we haven't won."

"Aliaro could have fled," Skarpa pointed out.

"It won't make any difference. Once the palace is destroyed, so is his authority. But that's why he'll be there."

"I don't see that."

"Think about it. Everywhere we've been there's been little or no local control. Everyone defers to either the Autarch or their Shahib, out of fear of their power. Everything's referred to Liantiago. That's

where the decisions are made. What happens if the palace is gone and Southern Army holds Liantiago?"

"Everything falls apart."

"Exactly. Aliaro has to know that. So do his ministers or advisors. He can't leave, because if he does, and they defeat us, they'll know that they don't need him. If he does, and we take the palace, his life is forfeit anywhere he goes, and everyone will be looking for him. So he can't leave, and he won't let them leave."

"You make it sound like, win or lose, we've got problems."

"The problems are much less if we win-when we win. As Bhayar's regional governor, you replace Aliaro, and life goes on-with more than a few changes, although you'll have to make them gradually, just like Rescalyn did in Tilbor."

"Regional governor? Aren't you assuming a lot?"

"You really think Bhayar will give up Antiago? He'll have to let you be governor for a while, and promote you to marshal. That way, you get a generous stipend. If he really wants to replace you, though, he'll probably give you a small high holding in an out-of-the-way place. If he did any less, he'd face trouble from the other senior officers."

"We can talk about your dreams for me after we deal with Aliaro," replied Skarpa dryly. "How do you propose that we bring down the palace?"

"By not letting Aliaro know that's our intention." Quaeryt went on to explain what he had in mind.

When he had finished, Skarpa nodded slowly, then asked, "Will it work?"

"I think it will … but until we try it, who knows? What I do know is that we have to get the Antiagon imagers involved from the beginning, and the imager undercaptains have to be able to handle them … at least for a little while. That's why we'll use three columns, and why I want the approaches by Fourteenth and Third Regiments to lag the initial attack by first company and Nineteenth Regiment."

Skarpa looked squarely at Quaeryt. "Answer me honestly. Do you really think we should attack? Why?"

"From a tactical point of view, I can't think of a single good reason to attack-except that I don't know anything else that will work. And after seeing what I've seen just so far, I'd find it hard to live with myself if we walked away. I also think that trying to get out of here without getting rid of Aliaro and his imagers would be almost as bad as fighting and losing."

Skarpa nodded slowly. "I have the same feelings. Just looking at the palace complex tells me that." He took the books off the corners of the map and rolled it up. "Now we just have to brief the senior

officers … and ignore Kharllon's unbelieving expression when I tell him that we're going to attack the most fortified stronghold in all Lydar without cannon, siege engines, and with only a handful of imagers when the other side has as many troopers, scores of catapults, archers, and likely twice as many imagers. Except I'll leave all that out." Skarpa snorted. "Good thing I believe you."

Let's just hope you can deliver. In the back of Quaeryt's mind was the fear that someday he wouldn't be able to deliver. *Except that already happened. You couldn't deliver Khel, and that's why you're here.* After a moment, he had another thought. *A perfect example of tripling an already risky wager.*

He said nothing, just turned and followed Skarpa.

Almost to the instant when the first distant bells rang seventh glass-since all of the anomens near the palace were silent-Quaeryt led first company and Nineteenth Regiment out through the white stone gates of the villa to the southeast of the palace complex and onto the wide white stone boulevard leading to the Square of the Autarch.

Kharllon's expression had been close to incredulous, as Skarpa had predicted, and the senior commander had asked twice whether he would have to complete an assault on the palace walls, despite Skarpa's assurance that such would not be required.

Quaeryt's own briefing of the imager undercaptains, all now with him and first company, had been direct and simple. "We have to look like we're the spearhead of a full assault on the palace and get their imagers to try to stop us. Threkhyl … you and Horan need to take out as many catapults as you can. Horan, you've got the ones on the right, Threkhyl the ones on the left. Khalis, Lhandor, you'll be shielding; Khalis, the left; Lhandor, the right. Voltyr … you'll be standing by to handle whatever new they throw at us."

As first company led the way up the wide boulevard, the only sounds that Quaeryt heard were those of hooves on stone and the low susurration of muted voices.

Every street, lane, and alley they passed was silent and empty under the clear sky and early morning sun. *No rainstorms to help, and we're more than a half mille from the harbor, but there haven't been that many storms since we've been in Antiago.* That wasn't surprising, given the land's reputation for being hot, dry, and sunny.

Quaeryt noticed several other things. All the ways, from boulevard to streets to lanes to alleys, were paved … and all the buildings looked to be about the same age and constructed in the same style. *Because that's what the autarchs wanted? Or because this entire part of Liantiago was destroyed and rebuilt? Both?* Either way it suggested very strong local control … and a great deal of imaging.

When they were less than two blocks from the Square of the

Autarch, the one- and two-story stone dwellings and shops gave way to taller and more ornate private dwellings, clearly with central courtyards-most likely for Shahibs or wealthy factors, if not both, and possibly for high functionaries at the palace.

Quaeryt glanced toward the palace-an imposing white stone structure, with walls within walls, beginning with the low stone wall around the square. Behind that was the recently imaged mid-square wall, a good hundred yards back from the outer wall and another hundred forward of the palace walls, four yards high, with catapults behind the second wall. Then there was the palace wall proper, more than thirty yards high and running all the way around the palace, which in turn rose another forty yards above the walls with six towers, each at a point on the hexagonal main building within the hexagonal walls.

Quaeryt quickly returned his attention to the immediate tasks at hand. He could see men scrambling into position on the scores of catapults behind the higher walls in the middle of the square, walls whose whiteness confirmed that they had been recently imaged into place on the level stone surface of Autarch's Square, a stone plaza some three quarters of a mille on a side, without a single fountain, statue, or other ornamentation-a different kind of declaration of power, Quaeryt felt.

"Voltyr … take down the center part of the square wall … but so that it doesn't block our advance. And stand ready to open the gaps for the other two regiments."

"Yes, sir."

No sooner had the first ranks ridden through the gap in the outer square wall than a fire grenade, and then another, arched from behind the mid-square wall, toward first company. Quaeryt imaged them back toward the catapults, but the first grenade started to explode, and then turned to ice pellets that showered harmlessly on the white paving stones of the square. The second grenade just vanished.

They know as much as you do … and likely more. We need to keep them busy, then.

"Threkhyl and Horan! Start to work on taking down those catapults."

Immediately two catapults sagged, and then two more.

Quaeryt imaged a flurry of red-hot iron needles into the areas where he thought the catapult magazines of fire grenades would be.

Not only did he feel resistance, but nothing happened.

He couldn't say he was totally surprised.

One of the catapults suddenly was surrounded with an icy mist, but a third one exploded into fragments.

"Got the bastard anyway!" Threkhyl's voice held satisfaction and

determination.

"Voltyr! Open the other gaps!" ordered Quaeryt, knowing that he needed to keep the Antiagon imagers concentrating on the attackers.

This time, as the vanguards of the flanking regiments moved into the square, arrows arched from somewhere, not toward first company, but toward Fourteenth Regiment and Third Regiment.

Quaeryt managed to block the first flights with short, broad shields, trying not to use too much energy, yet understanding all too clearly that, somehow, the Antiagon imagers knew where the Telaryn imagers were.

Two more catapults went down with explosions, and another collapsed in a shower of ice.

For a long instant … the entire square was silent.

Then … a shower of flame-not merely a few score fire grenades-but a huge curtain of flame, a vast expanse of Antiagon Fire that turned the very sky crimson-yellow-green, arched down toward the Telaryn forces.

"Shields!" ordered Quaeryt.

While Khalis and Lhandor created a wedge-shaped shield over the center of Southern Army, the near-curtain of Antiagon Fire cascaded down each side of the shield, growing and building with intensity enough that Quaeryt could sense that that immense concentration of heat could easily incinerate the troopers on each side of first company and Nineteenth Regiment, as well as those in Fourteenth Regiment and Third Regiment.

Heat! Of course. With that much heat so close, Quaeryt didn't even have to draw that much from the Antiagon forces, as he concentrated on imaging away rock and soil from under the entire palace, from well below where the shields of the Antiagon imagers were anchored and locked, yet he did extend a thread of imaging to the harbor … just in case. Even as he concentrated and hurried, he made, from well below where the shields of the Antiagon imagers were anchored and locked, a huge empty space, imaging the material that had been there into the air above the rear of the palace. Even as he concentrated and hurried, he made certain that he imaged away more rock from under the rear of the palace complex than from the front so that when it all collapsed the rubble would largely tumble away from the Telaryn forces.

"Hold shields!"

The ground trembled … then shook … and a huge groaning drowned out everything.

Behind the high hexagonal walls, the palace shivered, and the tall towers began to shake, and then collapse … except that the entire palace complex shuddered, sagged, and then dropped from sight-just as a small mountain of soil, gravel, and stones cascaded from the sky

into the depression from which not even the top of the palace walls protruded.

The stone paving under the mare's hooves shook and trembled, and the trembling got worse. From the corners of his eyes, even as Quaeryt tried to hold shields to protect first company, he could see buildings in the distance trembling and shaking.

Gale force winds whipped toward him, so cold that ice pellets dropped everywhere, but he still tried to hold his shields …

… until a wall of whiteness, so cold he could do nothing … toppled from nowhere onto him … and froze him in burning ice.

67

The first thing Quaeryt saw when his eyes opened was white … white everywhere. He was covered in blankets and shivering, so much so that he couldn't focus his eyes on anything.

"Sir…?"

"I'm … alive … I think." His entire body ached, and he couldn't stop shivering. "What happened?"

"Submarshal Skarpa says the city is ours. The part of it that's left after all the shaking."

"Left?" Quaeryt shivered so violently he couldn't say more.

"You need to drink some watered lager, sir … anything." Khalis rose from the chair beside the bed and guided a mug to Quaeryt's lips, holding it steady against his shivering.

Quaeryt could only take small sips, but after a time the worst of the shivering stopped, as did most of the twitching in his eyes. The throbbing in his head did not subside.

Despite the white walls of the bedchamber where he lay, the light coming through the windows was muted and gloomy. "What glass…?"

"It's just past the third glass of the afternoon, sir. It's darker than you'd expect. Most of the city was covered in fog, yesterday and most of today. The sun's finally burning it off. That's because of all the ice that coated the ruins and the square."

"What day is it?"

"Jeudi afternoon, sir."

Two days … better than the last time … you hope.

"You need to drink more, sir."

Quaeryt didn't object, and he wasn't shaking so much when he finished another series of swallows rather than sips.

"Don't try to get up, sir," said Khalis as he set the mug on the table beside the wide bed. "I'll be right back. Commander Skarpa wanted to know when you were awake."

"I'm not going anywhere," said Quaeryt dryly. He had the feeling that his head might fall off if he even tried to stand … if his legs didn't collapse first.

As Khalis left, Quaeryt turned his head and looked toward the window. *Ruins and shaking?* Beyond was a garden, although he could see that beyond an ornamental tree he did not recognize there was a wall … and there were cracks and gaps in the mortar between the stones. There were also cracks in the plaster finish of the outside wall of the bedchamber.

But why would imaging a pit beneath the palace cause ruins elsewhere? He frowned, before recalling that the paving stones of the

Autarch's Square had been shaking so hard that the mare had struggled to keep her footing. *But why?*

He turned his head and closed his eyes, but the flashes of light that interrupted his vision were even more disconcerting against the closed lids, and he opened them again, just as Khalis returned to the bedchamber.

"The submarshal will be here shortly, sir."

"What about first company? All the undercaptains?"

"We're all fine … well, except for bruises and cuts, little things like that."

"From all the shaking?"

"And the falling buildings everywhere."

Falling buildings? Why … Quaeryt didn't question what Khalis had clearly experienced, but why would the impact of the palace on whatever lay below the hole he'd imaged have caused so much shaking that it toppled buildings farther away than around the square?

Behind Khalis, the door opened, and Skarpa stepped through.

Khalis inclined his head and departed, closing the chamber door behind himself.

Skarpa walked over to the bed and looked down at Quaeryt. "You look like hogshit, Quaeryt."

"I don't think I feel quite that bad." *Almost, but not quite.*

"Good. I'd tell you that you need to stop doing this, but I don't think there's any place left in Lydar that will need your way of dealing with things." Skarpa snorted. "There's not even much left of the north side of the city. It's a good thing that most of our forces were on or near the square. Whatever you did brought down most of the buildings. Good thing most of the locals had fled, too. The problem was that not enough of them left." He paused. "What exactly did you do besides create a big hole and drop the palace into it?"

"That's all…" Quaeryt coughed, and the paroxysm sent waves of pain through his entire body. For several moments he couldn't move or see.

The submarshal waited.

Finally, Quaeryt could speak and see again, if in flashes. "I … just imaged a hole under the palace and all the rocks and sand and gravel and stone up above it, and … let it all fall."

"The entire city was shaking for a time, might have been a good half glass, give or take a quint. No one was keeping track."

"Casualties…?" Quaeryt ventured.

"We lost over a thousand to stray Antiagon Fire, flying rubble and falling houses … most of them were in Fhaasn's Twenty-sixth Foot. They weren't even on the boulevard around the Autarch's Square

when everything came apart. They got hit hard when the big dwellings on the south end of the square came down." Skarpa looked at Quaeryt. "As for the Antiagons … maybe two hundred of the troopers near the mid-square wall survived. No one in the palace complex … no imagers, so far as we can tell."

"The rest of the city?"

"Who knows? At least three or four hundred people were killed, maybe more than a thousand. Could have been more. Several thousand were likely hurt."

"You declare yourself regional governor?"

"Acting regional governor. Even Kharllon agreed to that. He's been pretty quiet. I've already gotten a handful of letters from some Shahibs, pledging allegiance to Bhayar. Appears that you scared them a bit."

"More … than I intended," Quaeryt admitted. "I still don't understand why the whole city shook."

"I wouldn't pretend to know. But in some places closer to the square it was pretty bad. There was a school … children of factors and Shahibs … the whole thing came apart…" Skarpa shook his head. "One of your undercaptains broke down and sobbed … something about one of the little girls being like his own daughter…"

"Do you know who that was?"

"I didn't see it. Zhelan told me. He didn't say who. I was a little occupied."

Baelthm, Horan, or maybe Threkhyl. The others can't have had children. Not yet, anyway. "What else should I know?"

Skarpa offered a shrug. "We're still getting control of the city."

Quaeryt wanted to frown, but he felt tired … so tired. Skarpa was hiding something from him, he was certain. "The imagers … are they…"

"They're all fine … except for bruises and the like." Skarpa's tone was firm and assured. "You need more rest. We'll talk later."

Quaeryt wanted to say more, to ask what Skarpa was hiding, but the flashes across his eyes were coming more often, and they hurt more … and then the white darkness rose around him again.

68

Quaeryt dozed and woke, and dozed and woke all through Jeudi night, but when he finally opened his eyes sometime after dawn on Vendrei morning, his thoughts weren't so jumbled. The flashes across his eyes had almost vanished, and the throbbing in his head was down to a dull ache. Unfortunately, that diminution of acute pain made him aware of soreness in his right thigh and upper arm, both of which were heavily bruised. He was also strong enough to prop himself up and reach for the mug of watered lager and slowly drink it. He'd almost finished it when Khalis appeared.

"How are you feeling, sir?"

"Much better." Quaeryt wasn't even tempted to reply with something along the lines of he couldn't have felt much worse. He had felt worse, much worse. "How did I get so bruised, Khalis? Did I get knocked off my mount?"

"Ah … not exactly, sir."

"What happened, then?"

"All that shaking … it caused gaps in the paving stones, and your mare, her forelegs got crushed in between two stones. She tried not to go down … but she did. So did you."

Quaeryt winced. The mare had carried him all the way across Lydar … and then to have her brought down by his acts … and paving stones …

"I'm sorry, sir. That was just the way it was."

"Those things happen. I just wish…" He shook his head. "You told me the undercaptains were all right, if bruised." He paused. "What about the rest of first company?"

"There were some broken arms and legs, the major said-from horses and men going down. No one was killed that I heard."

"I need to talk to the submarshal." Quaeryt slowly swung his legs over the side of the bed and put his feet on the stone floor. "Do I have a uniform somewhere?"

"Yes, sir … but…"

"I need to find the submarshal."

"He's in the study…"

"I'll get dressed and find him." *Skarpa won't tell you anything if you're still lying in a bed and looking helpless.*

After dressing, if slowly, Quaeryt did have to sit on the edge of the bed and drink more of the watered lager, as well as slowly chew a too-hard biscuit. Then he rose. "Point me in the right direction, Undercaptain."

"I'll show you, sir. It's only down the hall."

Quaeryt didn't argue with that, but rose slowly and followed the young Pharsi undercaptain through the door and then through what looked to be a lady's study to a wide tiled hallway.

Two doors down stood a pair of troopers, but neither said a word as Khalis opened the door and announced, "Submarshal, Commander Quaeryt to see you."

Quaeryt didn't wait for an acknowledgment, but walked in and took one of the whitewood chairs opposite the table desk, trying not to sink into it. His legs were feeling weaker than he would have liked. The door closed behind him.

Skarpa looked up from the papers and maps surrounding him. "You're up early."

"What weren't you telling me yesterday?" Quaeryt demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You were hiding something. What is it?"

The submarshal sighed, deeply, and his brow furrowed. "I'd hoped you wouldn't notice."

"I did. What didn't you tell me?"

"We found out early yesterday that when Aliaro heard about what we did at Kephria he sent three warships and some imagers north."

Vaelora … with only half a regiment to support her, and not a single imager! "Where did you find that out?"

"From the assistant harbormaster." Skarpa paused. "It might not be that bad."

"How could it not be that bad?" demanded Quaeryt.

"When he found out we were marching on Liantiago several days after that, Aliaro sent a fast schooner or ketch after them. The harbormaster didn't know why, but I'd wager it was to recall them to defend Liantiago."

"That wouldn't have stopped them from leveling and burning what was left of Kephria," Quaeryt pointed out.

"The schooner might have traveled faster."

"Not that much faster. The Antiagon warships are all built for speed. Have you seen the *Montagne*? Or the *Solis*? Are there any other ships either here or in Westisle?"

"No one's seen either. There is a large schooner in Westisle. I had the captain sail it here."

"Put me on that ship … I can recover on the trip."

"I thought you'd say that," replied Skarpa wryly. "What about Liantiago? What if those imagers return and you're gone?"

"Voltyr and Threkhyl can provide any imaging you need. Have them watch the harbor and sink any Antiagon ship that tries to enter the port. They can do that. It's hard enough to image over water. I

imagine it's even harder if you're in it or under it. As regional governor, you'll need some imagers anyway, and I planned on leaving them."

"Nice of you to tell me."

"You didn't want to hear my plans. Remember? And … Nineteenth Regiment can stay as well. The other undercaptains and first company can come with me." Even speaking that many words left Quaeryt feeling light-headed.

"You're not as well as you think."

"No … but Vaelora is Bhayar's sister."

Skarpa laughed harshly. "I worry more about you and your imagers than about Lord Bhayar. I already told the captain to be ready to sail before noon. Major Zhelan is readying first company, but the ship can't take any mounts. It'll be crowded enough with your imagers and the troopers. And I've sent a small paychest. You'll need it for supplies."

"Thank you. As for not having mounts, we'll make do."

"I did find a carriage, and you will ride in it, Commander. I won't be responsible for you falling off a mount when you shouldn't be up at all."

"Yes, sir."

"There are times when you can be impossible, you know?"

"If I weren't, you wouldn't be acting governor of Antiago, and Bhayar would likely be dead and Solis in the hands of Rex Kharst."

"Quaeryt … I know you're worried about Vaelora … but … don't take it out on me."

"I'm sorry. I am worried. She's not that far from having a child, only a month or so." *Maybe less.* "And she's not the kind to offer herself up." *Especially not after the way Aliaro treated her sister.*

"She and Baarl-and Khaern, if he's back-would certainly withdraw from an attack by imagers," Skarpa pointed out.

"I left that order-if they had any warning. But when Kharst attacked Kephria, Aliaro shelled Ephra and used his imagers to incinerate the attackers with no warning whatsoever." *And you weren't much different in your attacks on the cities of Liantiago. Is the Nameless returning the favor?* Quaeryt couldn't help but wonder that, even as he still doubted that there even was a Nameless.

"Just get yourself ready…" said Skarpa. "I'll make sure that everything else is on board and waiting for you."

"Thank you … and I'm sorry … It's just…"

"I do understand … Now get yourself out of here. Don't be too proud to ask Khalis or the others to help you."

"I won't." Quaeryt rose, deliberately, and inclined his head. "Thank you … again." Then he walked slowly to the study door.

In less than a glass, he was riding out from the villa in a white carriage, accompanied by Khalis and escorted by almost a company of troopers from Third Regiment.

How could you not have seen this? How? And with Vaelora expecting? She'd said that he'd need every imager. *But did you have to listen to her?* He'd assumed that Aliaro would have understood that Kephria was merely the first city to fall. *That was a terrible assumption.* He didn't even want to dwell on the fact that it might have cost him Vaelora-and their daughter.

Yet there was nothing he could do-now-beyond what he was about to do.

He forced himself to look at the buildings. From what he could tell, the villa in which he had been recovering was south and west of the Autarch's Square, possibly more than a half mille away. Yet, as he continued through the streets of Liantiago, every building near the villa showed some signs of damage, if as little as shutters hanging askew, or cracks in the outside walls. In more than a few instances, though, an entire dwelling had collapsed in on itself. Several times, the driver had to slow the carriage to ease it over or around raised paving stones, although, after another half mille, the damage was far less apparent. By the time the carriage had reached the harbor, there were almost no signs of damage, except for an occasional broken window, shutters askew, or fragments of roof tiles on the ground or sidewalks.

The three-masted schooner waiting at the long main pier was a comparatively large vessel, a good forty-five yards from stem to stern, with even a low sterncastle.

Voltyr and Threkhyl met the carriage even before Quaeryt could think about getting out. Standing behind them was Alazyn.

"Sir? The submarshal said that you'd ordered us to remain here to support him, but that you might have additional orders for us," said Voltyr.

"There may be imagers here that we don't know about. That's one reason why the submarshal may need you. The Autarch dispatched several to deal with Kephria. If they elude us, they may return here. For that reason, you are to attack and sink any Antiagon warship that attempts to port here."

Voltyr raised his eyebrows.

"Do you want to face another imager as strong as those who defended the palace? The *only* reason an Antiagon warship would be attempting to land immediately would be if they have an imager on board. Any other warship would likely stand off and send in someone under a parley flag. If that happens, make certain that the warship anchors offshore and keep them there until you get a dispatch from

me. If you don't, then you'll have to discuss things with the submarshal and exercise your own judgment." Quaeryt laughed softly, and even that hurt. "You'll have to rely on your own judgment in many matters, I suspect. Just remember that your fate, and the fate of all imagers, rests on our ability to support Lord Bhayar and to consolidate his rule over all Lydar. Anything else-anything-is likely to be fatal for imagers. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Voltyr nodded.

"I'm taking Elsior with Lhandor, Khalis, and Baelthm because his life is forfeit here … and maybe we can get him to join us. At the same time, I'd like you to keep your eye out for young imagers. You know how to train them."

"You're saying that we're likely to be here for a while, then?"

"You could be here for a month … or a year." *If not longer.* "Remember, when all of this started, I thought I'd be gone from Solis no more than two seasons. That was almost two years ago."

Threkhyl started to open his mouth, and Quaeryt looked hard at him. Threkhyl closed his mouth.

Quaeryt kept looking at Threkhyl. "You need to follow Voltyr's lead, his advice, and his orders. It might just keep you alive."

After a moment the ginger-bearded imager replied, "Yes, sir."

As the two undercaptains stepped back, Alazyn moved forward. "Sir? Any orders for me?"

Quaeryt frowned for a moment. "You're here to support the submarshal. You're also here to protect the imagers so that they can protect you as well. Don't let yourself or Nineteenth Regiment be separated from the imagers. Undercaptain Voltyr may gather and train other imagers. While technically you are his superior, listen to him and see if you can accommodate any needs he has."

Alazyn nodded. "I heard what you said to them."

"They weren't just words."

"No, sir. I've seen that."

Quaeryt smiled. "You're a perceptive officer, Alazyn. I appreciate that." He lowered his voice. "Be most careful around Commander Kharllon."

"Yes, sir." Alazyn offered a hand to help Quaeryt from the carriage.

As Quaeryt eased himself to his feet, several rankers hurried down to take his gear, such as it was. He walked slowly the distance to the foot of the gangway, his eyes flicking to the bow of the ship where carved letters, painted black, gave the name as *Zephyr*.

The dark-haired captain, younger than Quaeryt had expected, possibly only ten years older than Quaeryt, despite his weathered skin, stood just beyond the quarterdeck, his face impassive … for a

moment, until he saw Quaeryt's silver-white hair, honey-colored skin, and dark eyes. Quaeryt couldn't read his reaction, but it was clear Quaeryt's appearance had given him pause.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?"

The Antiagon smiled, if briefly. "Some do remember courtesy."

His accent was so heavy that it took Quaeryt a moment to catch his words and reply. "We try … when we can." Quaeryt crossed the gangway and then stopped short of the captain. "I'm Commander Quaeryt."

"Sario A'Basiol, sir."

"I would that we were not meeting this way, Captain, but matters are urgent. I don't know what you've been told, but speed is necessary. The late Autarch dispatched several ships to attack the Telaryn forces in Kephria under the command of Lord Bhayar's sister."

For a moment the captain did not react, but then Quaeryt caught the slightest swallow.

"The lady is also my wife," Quaeryt added, speaking slowly and as clearly as possible. "Whatever happened is not your fault, and I will not hold it against you. Failing to make the best speed possible, I will. I have some experience at sea. I was a junior quartermaster for several years."

The captain inclined his head. "I appreciate the explanation. I understand your concerns. We will do our best." After a moment, he added, "My quarters are yours, sir."

"Thank you." Quaeryt nodded in return. He just hoped he could make it to those quarters before his legs gave out.

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Once the *Zephyr* cleared the harbor of Liantiago on Vendrei, Quaeryt allowed himself to sleep. He didn't do much besides sleep, occasionally eat, and even more occasionally check the ship's heading and progress until after noon on Samedi. His sleep was interrupted often by the same thought-*Why didn't you think that Aliaro would retaliate? How could he have known that Kephria was just the first city you planned to attack?*

When he finally felt stronger and more lucid, but no less guilty and worried, and fearful that he might have lost Vaelora through that stupidity, he sent for Zhelan, in order to begin planning for whatever eventualities they might encounter on the voyage or when they reached the waters off Kephria and Ephra.

"You're looking better, Commander," were Zhelan's first words when he entered the cabin, a space that was far more modest than the captain's quarters on the *Montagne,* but then, those quarters had been designed to serve Lord Chayar, if necessary, not that Bhayar's father had used them more than once, on a voyage from Tilbora back to Solis, as Quaeryt recalled.

"I think that means that you think I'll recover fully in time," replied Quaeryt, gesturing to one of the chairs around the small oblong table at which he had earlier seated himself. "What do you think of the captain and the crew?"

"I'm no seaman, but they seem to be doing their best. I did tell the captain you wanted to be told of any ships the lookouts sighted, no matter what the glass of day or night."

"Good. Thank you. How is first company holding up?"

"We're down to eighty-one men, and that includes five with broken arms, and one with a broken leg. That doesn't include the undercaptains or the captive imager."

"That's not too bad," said Quaeryt dryly, "considering what I've asked of them."

"What do you plan for when we reach Kephria?"

"I have the feeling that we won't find much there. I can't imagine that Aliaro's imagers and the guns on his warships have left much of either Ephra or Kephria, and probably not much of Geusyn. I only hope that Vaelora and Baarl-and Khaern and Calkoran and their men-if they managed to reach Geusyn-could withdraw without horrendous casualties." Quaeryt shook his head. "I just didn't think. Aliaro just thought it was another attack on Kephria, and that Bhayar was repeating what Kharst did."

"Not everyone looks as far out as you, sir."

"Thank you. That's a polite way of saying that it's stupid to assume someone knows what you're going to do when they have no way of knowing. And you're right. It was stupid. Now … all I can do is hope, and try to make sure that the Antiagons don't cause any more damage because of my idiocy."

Zhelan nodded.

Quaeryt smiled wryly. "You're a good officer and a good man, Zhelan. You've saved my ass and that of the men on more than a few occasions."

"I've saved your pride, sir, and you've saved the men more times than I'd like to count."

"You've saved them as well. Now … my thoughts are that we really don't want to fight anyone. I'd just as soon sink the Antiagon ships and let it go at that. The problem is that the ships may not be there, and the imagers may be. If neither is there, all we can do is pick up the pieces." *And hope that we have some vestiges of a force left … and Vaelora. Please let her be there.* "I'd like your thoughts."

"I assume you or the other imagers can use concealments for the *Zephyr*…"

"We can, but a fast-moving schooner will leave a wake longer than we could extend a concealment, unless we're headed directly toward them. With three or four vessels…"

Quaeryt and Zhelan talked for close to a glass. Then Quaeryt had more watered lager and some biscuits and a bit of hard cheese.

After that, Khalis asked for a quint or so with Quaeryt, and he entered the cabin with Lhandor and Elsior. The three of them settled into two chairs on the other side of the oblong table, with Elsior on a stool between them.

"Before we start, sir … later … Horan wants to talk to you alone."

"Anytime," Quaeryt agreed. There wasn't much else he could do at the moment, although he felt much stronger than he had a day earlier, not that he was up to doing any imaging.

"Right now, Elsior has something to say," offered Khalis.

"Go ahead," Quaeryt said slowly … and gently.

"Are we sailing to Bovaria?"

"We are. It is now part of Telaryn."

"The others, the undercaptains, they say that they are free."

"They are as free as the other junior officers. No more. No less."

"They are paid?"

"The same as other undercaptains."

"You taught them to be better imagers."

"As well as I could."

Elsior's questions-and Quaeryt's answers-went on for almost a quint. Then, abruptly, he said, "I would like to be one of them."

"I am flattered," replied Quaeryt, "but might I ask why you have decided so quickly?"

"I have been afraid all my life. They are not afraid."

"We all fear the dangers of battle, and the dangers of imaging."

"That is a different fear."

Quaeryt couldn't argue with that. He nodded and waited.

"I had feared … if I offered allegiance to you … then Aliaro's imager assassins would track me across all Lydar." Elsior's eyes dropped. "They say you will have a place for imagers, a place where they will be free."

"As free as they are now. It will be a place that is part trooper and part school." Quaeryt decided not to try to explain more. Not at the moment. "It will be in Variana."

"I would like that."

So would we all … if matters were but that simple. "Is there anything else, Undercaptains?"

"Could you tell us what comes next, sir?" asked Lhandor.

"I wish I knew. We have to see what happened in Ephra and Kephria, and deal with the Antiagon imagers Aliaro sent out … if we can. If we can't, we have to reestablish a presence in what's left of Kephria or Geusyn." Quaeryt offered a shrug. "We just have to see. I'll let you know as I know."

"Thank you, sir."

After the three Pharsi left, Horan eased through the cabin door.

Quaeryt motioned for him to sit down, then took several long swallows of the watered lager, not as good as that which he imaged, but he wasn't about to try any imaging yet, although his headache was almost gone, and the flickering flashes of light no longer interrupted his sight.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt waited.

"Sir … I don't know as I can do this … imaging … anymore." The burly imager took a deep breath. "When the whole palace came down … you know … there were bodies everywhere. There was this school … the walls just came apart … One of them … she was a girl … a little girl … and she looked like my daughter … There was a boy, too…" Horan shook his head. "There were others…" He looked helplessly at Quaeryt.

"Imaging is one thing when it's directed at troopers. It's another when it hurts children and the innocent. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir … except … no, sir … there were so many bodies there."

"There were far more bodies outside Variana," Quaeryt said quietly.

“But … they weren’t children … she could have been my daughter…”

Quaeryt couldn’t help but wonder about Vaelora-and the unborn daughter she carried. *What if she and Vaelora died because of your mistake?*

“Sir…?”

“I’m sorry. I do understand. I don’t know what to say.” Quaeryt paused, thinking. Finally, he went on. “I won’t ask you to do anything against others … but until this is settled, could I ask you to stay with us and to provide shields? That would not harm others, and it would keep troopers and officers from greater harm.”

Horan took a deep breath. “I could do that, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“I will request, if anyone asks, to tell them that you asked about your future duties and that we discussed them.”

“Yes, sir. I can do that.”

After Horan left, Quaeryt looked blankly at the closed cabin door.

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By Solayi morning, the first day of Maris and, by the calendar, the first day of spring, Quaeryt felt far better, and could even hold light shields for a quint or so before having to drop them and rest. The weather remained the same, sunny and cool, with a wind out of the northwest that allowed fair speed and only moderate swells. Lundi was no different, and since his legs were steadier, Quaeryt had pulled on his riding jacket and stood on the low sterncastle beside Captain Sario, his eyes scanning the horizon, even though he knew that the lookout aloft would most likely see the sail of another vessel long before he did.

"How long have you been captain and master of the *Zephyr*?" asked Quaeryt conversationally.

"I have been captain for three years." Sario offered a tight smile. "I cannot say I am master, for the ship belongs to the family."

"Are you from Westisle?"

"Yes." After several moments the captain added, "Almost all merchanters port out of Westisle."

"Because it's farther from Liantiago?" Quaeryt let a sardonic tone creep into his words.

Sario did not reply.

"Lord Bhayar won't punish you for what you say. Neither will I. Besides, Bhayar has all of two warships at present." *If that. Who knows what might have happened to the* Montagne *and the* Solis *if they encountered the Antiagon imagers?* "He's always been friendly and fair to merchanters in Telaryn, and he is now to those in Bovaria." *So long as they don't try to cheat him.* "That won't change. In fact, you'll likely do better because all the ports in Lydar will be open to you."

"One of the officers said you know Lord Bhayar well."

"We have known each other since we were students. We had the same tutor."

"And it is true that you married his sister?"

Quaeryt laughed softly, trying not to think what might have happened to Vaelora. "He was the one who insisted on it. We were both fortunate." Quaeryt's voice turned somber. "I hope we still are."

"A man who has loved truly and been loved so is always fortunate, even when the Nameless turns from him."

"I'd rather be more fortunate than that, Captain."

"So would we all, sir."

Quaeryt paused. "I'm sorry. You sound like a man who has experienced love and loss. I would not pry…"

"She died in childbirth. So did our son. I was not there. I was

here." Sario's words were clipped.

"I am truly sorry." After several moments Quaeryt asked, "Has your family always been from Westisle?"

"So far as we know."

"Did you help build the *Zephyr*?"

Sario looked at Quaeryt. "How did you know that?"

"I watched you. You know every sound, and you don't have to look. You know exactly what to tell your crew when the least little thing is not right."

"Any good captain should know that."

"The hull is cedar, isn't it? From Hassyl?"

"Loboro. In the hills west of Hassyl. We have lands there."

"The *Zephyr* is a fast ship, I suspect."

"One of the fastest," admitted Sario. "Except for the *Boreal*."

"She's a family ship, too, I take it?"

"Of course." Sario did smile, if but for a moment. "You have the look and the manner of what some would call a lost one."

"I've been called that. My parents died of the plague or the Red Death when I was so young I barely remember them. I didn't even realize I was Pharsi until much later. My hair used to be whitish-blond." *Until Variana.*

"I would not ask what…" Sario paused, as if uncertain as to how much to ask.

"Sail ho!" came the cry from the lookout aloft.

"What ships?" called Sario, immediately looking forward with greater intensity.

"Looks to be three ships, sir! Two Antiagon men-of-war and a ketch."

"What's their bearing?" called Quaeryt.

"A quint to starboard, sir!"

Sario looked to Quaeryt.

"Bring her onto a direct closing course, Captain."

"There are three vessels, sir, and two are warships."

"Closing course, as close to head to head as possible, if you would, Captain."

Sario turned to the helmsman. "Half quint starboard."

Quaeryt gestured to the duty ranker posted at the sterncastle ladder. "Have the undercaptains report to me."

"Yes, sir."

Zhelan appeared almost immediately. "Sir?"

"Antiagon warships. Likely the ones Aliaro dispatched to Kephria and then recalled. Whether they are or not, we'll have to deal with them."

"Sir…" ventured Zhelan, "I would not like to be the one to

suggest this…"

"But they might have captives or prisoners? Is that it?"

"It is possible, is it not?"

"Possible, but hardly likely. The last time Kephria was attacked, Aliaro's imagers killed every last one of the Bovarians. Second, I doubt that they would know that Vaelora's there. Third, the very last thing she would allow would be to be captured. Fourth, neither would Baarl or Khaern." *Yet … even with all those reasons …* Quaeryt shook his head. "So unlikely we can't afford to consider it."

"What about cannon, sir? We have none."

"That's another reason for the concealment and for a course straight at them. They shouldn't be able to see us, and most guns are mounted midships. They'll have to get close enough to see our wake to guess at where we are, and then they'll have to turn to use them, and we should be close enough to use imaging by then." *You hope.*

Zhelan's nod only signified that he had heard Quaeryt's explanation, not that he agreed with it.

While he and the major waited for the undercaptains, Quaeryt strained to see the sails reported by the lookout, but even as the imagers gathered, he still could not see any sign of the ships. Finally, he turned to the undercaptains.

"We have three Antiagon ships headed toward us. The lookout reports that two are warships. The third may be the ship sent to fetch them back to Liantiago. They likely have imagers aboard, as well as Antiagon Fire. We can't let them get past us. Nor can we let them avoid us. The *Zephyr* is faster than they are, but they outnumber us. We'll need to approach under concealment, and then attack." Deciding not to mention cannon, he turned to Horan. "If you'd see to a concealment for now, and we'll need shields when we're closer."

"Yes, sir."

"Lhandor … I'll need you to remove a large chunk of the stem of the lead vessel, but not until we're closer. Khalis … you'll need to see to the second one. I'd like enough removed that she goes down fast."

"Yes, sir."

"Baelthm … just stand by to see what you can do."

The oldest imager nodded solemnly.

A quint passed before Quaeryt could easily make out the three sets of sails, and there was no doubt that the lookout had identified the vessels correctly. The first two flew the maroon battle ensign of Antiago, while the third, a ketch, bore no ensign, although the rigging was clearly Antiagon.

"There's no sign of another ship?" Quaeryt asked Sario.

"No, sir. The lookout would have called it out."

Just where is the other warship? Still off Kephria? Was it possible

that the *Montagne* or the *Solis* might have encountered it and sunk it? Or had the Antiagons sunk or damaged both Telaryn warships?

Quaeryt watched and forced himself to wait as the Antiagon ships drew nearer. Finally, he turned to Horan. "We'll need shields now."

"Yes, sir."

The distance continued to close, and the Antiagons continued to hold their heading and course.

"In another few hundred yards, Lhandor…" Quaeryt began.

A large flare of Antiagon Fire exploded in midair, less than fifty yards from the bow of the *Zephyr*. At that moment Quaeryt could see the nearest ship begin to turn to bring her guns into play, and then a puff of smoke from the forward gun port.

Those are pretty good indicators that these are some of the ships that went to Kephria. But how did they know where we are? Quaeryt glanced to Horan. He could see the perspiration on the big undercaptain's forehead … although his shields had held. *But at least one of the imagers at the road wall had known where first company had been, even behind a concealment.* "Just keep holding those shields, Horan." Quaeryt turned, glad that whatever the Antiagon had fired had not struck the *Zephyr*. "Image the first vessel, Lhandor."

Abruptly the first five yards of the Antiagon warship vanished. Totally. What remained of the forecastle and the bow plowed into the swells, and the entire vessel shuddered, coming to a halt in what seemed to be a handful of yards.

Quaeryt imaged two yard-wide holes in the hull amidships, just in case. Flashes of light flared across his eyes, and he could feel the unsteadiness in his legs. "The second ship, Khalis."

Another fireball slammed into Horan's shields, and then a third, before the stem section of the second ship vanished, and it too plowed into the swells and began to nose down.

Quaeryt could see the ketch swinging hard to port trying to get the wind full in its sails, in hopes of outrunning what had struck the two larger vessels. "Khalis … can you stop the third ship?"

"I'll see, sir."

A portion of the ketch's stem disappeared, but not a large section, and Khalis went to his knees on the deck. "Harder to image over water."

Abruptly parts of the sails of the ketch caught fire, and then the mainmast swayed and then toppled, as if some of its stays had parted. From beside the others, Baelthm staggered and sat down hard on the sterncastle deck.

"I can do a little more," said Lhandor.

Another hole appeared at the waterline of the ketch, just aft of midships.

Almost inexplicably, both warships exploded into pillars of fire, burning fiercely.

"What?"

"How did that happen?"

It took Quaeryt a moment to realize what had happened. "Water … you must have opened the forward magazines to the sea, and cracked or severed a fire grenade or shell. That sometimes happens with Antiagon Fire."

"They must not have had much left," said Sario from behind the imagers. "Otherwise, the entire ship would have vanished. I saw that happen once when I was a boy."

Must not have had much left? Quaeryt managed to keep his face impassive as he watched the ketch, hoping he did not have to image anymore, and wondering if he even could, but the fire had spread, and the smaller vessel was markedly lower in the water than even moments before.

"Can you circle here, Captain, until we're certain?"

"Yes, sir." Sario's voice had returned to the impassive tones with which he had spoken earlier.

Quaeryt understood. He also knew that the captain didn't understand all that was at stake, and there was no way to explain it, not to a merchant captain who loved ships and cared for those who sailed them. "Imagers. Stand down, but stay on deck here."

Lhandor sat down, and Khalis actually stretched out on his back on the hard planks, his face pale and damp. "We'll need some watered ale or lager here," Quaeryt called to the duty ranker.

"Yes, sir."

In moments, several rankers appeared with water bottles.

After another quint Quaeryt directed Sario to have the *Zephyr* resume its course for Kephria. By then, the undercaptains looked less worn-out. Quaeryt finally dismissed them, but he kept looking back, long after they had left behind the scattered debris remaining, moved up and down by the regular swells of the Gulf.

Behind him stood Zhelan, equally silent.

After a time, Sario eased over to Quaeryt. "You gave them no chance."

"You saw those fireballs they sent at us."

"Why did they do that? The *Zephyr* is an Antiagon schooner, with an Antiagon rig."

"Because we raised imaging defenses, and that told the imagers on the warships that we were not friendly. I had not realized that they could detect those defenses," Quaeryt admitted.

"Did you have to destroy them all?"

"Not to have done so would have risked too much." *At Liantiago,*

Aliaro would have given us no chance. Nor did he give Kharst's imagers any chance. And then there was Chaerila. Quaeryt smiled sadly. "There are times when to afford mercy is foolish. This was one of those times."

"These are terrible times, when whole ships go down in moments, and cities topple into dust."

"I hope we can end these times before long," replied Quaeryt. *But how many warriors and leaders have thought that? Did Hengyst? Or Chayar? Or Kharst when he took Khel?*

The captain eased away.

Quaeryt continued to watch where the third-and smaller-Antiagon vessel had gone down.

He kept thinking. *Three warships and a courier or sloop or that ketch … What happened to the other ship? Is it still off Kephria? Or have we missed it entirely? And what did they do in Kephria?*

Quaeryt was all too afraid that he knew. The only question was if anyone survived … and who.

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On Mardi, the weather held, as did the wind, but Captain Sario remained distant, although by Meredi afternoon, his occasional comments and responses to Quaeryt were less clipped and almost pleasant at times. Quaeryt found himself pacing the deck on the sterncastle, searching for sails and listening, but all that the lookout had sighted were two fishing vessels and a beaten-up Ferran trader with what Sario called a "bastard rig." He was again able to hold full shields, if not for so long as he would have liked, and his headache had vanished, as had the intermittent flashes that had disrupted his eyesight.

"You always pace like that, Commander?" asked the captain.

"Not when I'm riding," returned Quaeryt with a smile, not that he felt like smiling, worrying as he did about Vaelora and Eleventh Regiment and what had likely happened to Ephra, Kephria, and possibly Geusyn.

Sario frowned, then opened his mouth, as if to speak, then closed it as the lookout called from above.

"Sail ho! Antiagon warship, flying a battle ensign."

Sario looked to Quaeryt. "You want a closing course again?"

"If you would."

Once the captain called out the orders to the helmsman, he turned to Quaeryt. "Are you going to sink this one, too?" asked Sario.

"If we can. It's likely to have another imager aboard and Antiagon Fire."

"Why? Haven't you won?"

"Not until Aliaro's imagers are all dead."

"That won't bring your wife back."

"No … it won't, and I can hope she's survived … but I also have to answer to her brother. What would you do?"

"You don't think he'd be reasonable?"

"After his older sister died in Liantiago and Aliaro barely acknowledged it?" asked Quaeryt dryly. "Or the dead daughter she tried to give birth to?"

"Oh…" Sario's voice dropped off for a moment. "You're close to him."

"At times." *When he wishes it.* "He tries to be fair, and from what I've seen of the other rulers in Lydar, he does a much better job of it."

"Even those in Khel?"

"The High Council seems fair enough, but after the Red Death and the Bovarian depredations, Khel is too weak to stand alone. Bhayar has offered terms to the High Council. They're considering them."

"What sort of terms?" asked Sario warily.

"He's trying to work out a way to let the Council handle local matters while having the same laws and tariffs as in all the rest of Lydar." Strictly speaking, that wasn't quite true. That was what Quaeryt and Vaelora were working toward.

"Why do they get more favorable terms?"

"Well … they didn't attack Telaryn the way Kharst did, and they didn't send troops to support Kharst against Telaryn, and they didn't attack Telaryn ships that weren't bothering them … among other things."

"Are those things true?"

"Every last one of them. We fought Antiagon troopers and their Antiagon Fire when we marched up the Aluse to take Variana. When the *Montagne* was carrying Bhayar's sister to Khel as an envoy, Antiagon warships attacked."

"That was not wise," temporized Sario, "but…"

"Should we have invaded and destroyed much of Liantiago on that basis?" Quaeryt offered a sad smile and a shrug. "We did it not because of those provocations but because those provocations indicated that there would always be fights and conflicts so long as Antiago and Telaryn were separate."

"The worst of acts are often justified by the best of reasons."

"They are," agreed Quaeryt. "Sometimes those reasons are right. Sometimes they are wrong. We often live to see where they were wrong. We seldom live to see where they were right." He turned and ordered, image-projecting his voice, "Undercaptains on deck!"

As usual, Zhelan was the first to appear. "Another Antiagon, sir?"

"That's what the lookout reports-flying a battle ensign."

"You think they'll attack?"

"If we raise a concealment. If we don't, they'll likely try to board, and I'd rather not deal with them at close quarters. Imaging isn't terribly effective against cannon." Quaeryt paused. Was that the reason why the Antiagon ships were so effective? Cannon at long range, and imaging and Antiagon Fire up close? It certainly fit in with the pattern of power he'd observed in Antiago-demand absolute obedience and destroy anyone who failed to obey. And that pattern made sense, in a way, for a land that was not all that wealthy.

"Sir?" pressed Zhelan.

"Sorry. I was thinking." Quaeryt glanced around as the undercaptains formed up.

When they were all there, including Elsior, he began to speak. "There's another Antiagon warship headed toward us … flying a battle ensign. We'll handle this in the same way as we did the last one. Just stand by for the moment."

"Yes, sir."

When the Antiagon was still barely visible from the deck, Quaeryt turned. "A concealment shield, if you would, Horan."

"Yes, sir."

Quaeryt had decided to see how the Antiagon responded to the concealment and the shields before making a final decision as to what to do with the warship. So he-and the captain and the imager undercaptains-watched and waited.

As in the case of the other Antiagon warships, the oncoming vessel continued directly toward the *Zephyr* until only a few hundred yards separated them. At that point, the ship began to turn to bring its guns to bear, and a huge fireball exploded against Horan's shields, with such force that the undercaptain staggered, even though his shields were linked to the *Zephyr* itself.

"Lhandor! Shields!"

"Yes, sir! Shields in place."

"Horan … release your shields. Khalis, image away the stem of the Antiagon. Now!"

Almost simultaneously, the first seven or eight yards of the attacker's bow vanished, and another massive fireball flared against Lhandor's shields.

As the stricken vessel nosed into the swells and shuddered to a halt, without a single gun firing, thankfully, Quaeryt imaged out a chunk of the hull midships. He didn't even feel light-headed.

Another firebolt, far smaller than the first or second, splashed against Lhandor's shields.

Then Quaeryt could see crew members jumping off the waterlogged vessel. Some were caught in midair as the ship exploded with such violence that debris rained down from Lhandor's shields, and the Pharsi undercaptain turned pale.

Quaeryt immediately extended his own shields. "Lhandor … you can release shields." He just hoped he didn't have to weather another explosion, but he continued to hold the shields, even as he began to feel light-headed, until he was certain that there were no hidden survivors who might be imagers.

Belatedly, he also realized why the Antiagons tended to attack without quarter-with all that they carried, they were also more than vulnerable, unless they could force another ship to surrender by pounding it with guns from a distance. *But why didn't anyone consider that?*

The answer was strangely obvious when he thought about it. Neither Bovaria nor Telaryn, nor Tilbor, when it had been ruled by the Khanar, had ever built a fleet because they were not trading powers, and the High Council of Khel probably hadn't had the

resources to do so.

"Imagers. Stand down."

After another quint passed with no sign of other vessels, Quaeryt dismissed the undercaptains.

"Do you think we'll see more Antiagons?" asked Zhelan.

"I have no idea," Quaeryt admitted. "Over the past months, we've taken care of more than a few warships, but I have no idea how many the autarchs had. Once we get to Kephria, I hope we won't have to worry about that anymore."

"Someone will," predicted Zhelan.

"For a while. What exactly will they do? I doubt they usually carry imagers, and they'll eventually have to port somewhere. If every port in Lydar belongs to Bhayar…"

"They'll surrender or become pirates."

"Most of those left will likely surrender, especially if Bhayar grants them a pardon if they serve him." *And he should, since he really doesn't have a fleet.*

"You think he should?"

"We're not hunting down defeated Bovarian troopers or Antiagon troopers. I don't see the difference, and he'll get some serviceable warships."

"It might work," Zhelan grudged, before easing away from Quaeryt.

After several moments Sario eased closer to the commander. "The captains of those ships, they would like to remain captains. They will hear what you have done here. If Lord Bhayar grants a pardon, most will serve him."

"I would hope so." Quaeryt was hoping that Bhayar would follow his advice, or that he'd suggest something along those lines without Quaeryt even mentioning it … and that the Antiagon captains would do as Sario predicted.

"Did you notice, Captain, that we did nothing until we were attacked?" Quaeryt asked gently.

"I saw that." Sario shook his head. "Why did they do that?"

"Because they know that we are a threat to everything they believe in." Quaeryt gestured to the undercaptains. "In Liantiago, imagers live in buildings lined with metal. Each imager is apprenticed to an older imager, and they never left those buildings except to enforce the will of the Autarch. My undercaptains have a few more rules than the other undercaptains, but they have been able to do what the others do." *And you're fighting as much to keep those comparative freedoms as for Bhayar.*

"But will they have those freedoms once Lord Bhayar rules all?"

"That is part of what we seek, and the way I have tried to train

them makes that far more likely."

For a long moment the captain did not speak. Finally, he said, "Then you are the one that Aliaro should have feared, not Lord Bhayar."

Quaeryt shook his head. "Without Lord Bhayar, this would not have happened."

"From what I have seen and from what my crew has overheard, without you Lord Bhayar would not be feared and Rex Kharst would rule much of Lydar."

Quaeryt laughed softly. "All things great or terrible come from more than one man, or even one group of men, no matter what the scholars say or write." *And the only question is whether Bhayar remembers this … except that it's your job-and Vaelora's-to make him remember.* He tried not to think about how things would be if something had happened to her.

Before long, he was again pacing the deck and looking to the northeast, as if his glances and pacing could speed the *Zephyr* even more swiftly toward a destination he feared for as much as he hoped to see before long.

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By early Vendrei morning Quaeryt was alternating standing on and pacing across the low sterncastle of the *Zephyr*, running full before the wind, as she angled in toward the thin and wispy trails of smoke rising from Kephria. To the west, not even smoke rose from the flattened and burned-out heap of rubble that had been Ephra. Quaeryt glanced to the schooner's foremast, where flew the best replica of the Telaryn banner that Lhandor had been able to draw and Baelthm had been able to image. From the aft mast flew a replica, as well as Quaeryt could remember it, of Bhayar's personal banner.

Marshaled on the main deck was first company, weapons and gear ready, at Zhelan's urging, although Quaeryt had his doubts whether such would be necessary, one way or the other. Behind Quaeryt, on the port side, were the imager undercaptains, while Zhelan stood beside their commander.

Quaeryt studied the harbor, as devastated as he had expected, if not more so. The bright sun brought the destruction into a clear focus. The harbor itself was empty, with not even a trace of a vessel or the smallest rowboat or skiff. The only colors visible beside the blue-gray of the water and that of dull brown mud were shades of gray and black-and a thin line of whitish smoke coming from the old fort beside the long main pier, the southernmost one. On the pier, the few remaining bollards were mere charred husks of what they had once been. To the south of the pier was the fort, a square stone structure constructed on a raised knoll. The walls that formed three sides of a rectangle were pitted and shattered in places, blackened in others, and the small building that had comprised the rear east wall was only a heap of rubble.

Quaeryt turned his eyes more northward where, against the south side of the old river wall, was the northernmost stone pier, rising out of the mud and charred debris. From that pier the shoreline angled eastward downstream of the river wall, forming the northern side of the small harbor. What had been a muddy flat stretching southeast was now a stretch of baked mud and ashes that also covered parts of the old boulevard that had bordered the northern part of the harbor. Where there had been dwellings and shops, there remained nothing but charred brick and stone walls, half tumbled down. Not a single structure-except the stone fort-remained recognizable.

Quaeryt glanced back toward Sario, who stood to the side and slightly forward of the helmsman.

"Sir?"

"Bring her in toward the southern pier, the long one." Quaeryt

turned. “At the seaward end on the north side.”

“Yes, sir.”

“They destroyed the entire town,” said Zhelan. “It was *their* town, and they burned it to the ground.”

“That’s because the people failed-in the eyes of the Autarch,” Quaeryt said.

“I don’t feel quite so bad about Liantiago right now,” murmured the major.

As the *Zephyr* neared the pier, Quaeryt could see an officer-Khaern, Quaeryt thought from the graying and faded red hair under the visor cap-and a squad of troopers waiting near the end of the long main stone pier. They did not move as Sario maneuvered the *Zephyr* alongside and a crewman leapt from the bow to the pier, line in hand. The seaman had to run the line around the base of the charred bollard, barely above the stone of the pier itself. Another crewman leapt off near the stern and ended up tying the line around and under one of the pier stones.

As Quaeryt stepped off the gangway and toward Khaern, he took in the pier itself. The gray stone was more worn, chipped, and weathered than he recalled, and blackened in spots. In other places, intense heat-likely from Antiagon Fire-had actually cracked the stone. Quaeryt looked at the subcommander, his face gaunt, with circles under his eyes. “I came as soon as I could.”

“We thought you would-”

“Vaelora? How is she?”

“She’s the reason we’re mostly all alive, sir,” replied the subcommander.

“How is she?” asked Quaeryt impatiently.

“She was hurt, but she says she’ll be fine. She told me to tell you that. Two of the village healers are taking care of her.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in the fort … over there.” Khaern pointed. “The only things left are the stone structures. The Antiagons sailed up with three big warships and shelled the larger buildings. Some of the shells were Antiagon Fire. Then they landed almost a regiment of troopers and burned everything that would burn. From what we could see, they began by attacking here, but then they leveled and burned Ephra, and then the imagers-there were three of them-accompanied the troopers to Geusyn-”

“They burned it to the ground, didn’t they?” asked Quaeryt.

“Yes, sir, but your wife had us send word, and most of the people escaped.”

“How badly was she hurt?”

“She said to tell you that she will be fine, sir.”

That was the same answer the subcommander had given before, and it didn't satisfy Quaeryt, but he could see Khaern had his own concerns. So he said quickly, "On the way here, we destroyed three Antiagon warships and a ketch. Since they had imagers, I'd like to think that they were the ones who fired Kephria. No one survived. Not that such is much consolation for the deaths and destruction here."

"Ah … what about Liantiago, sir?"

"Oh … Submarshal Skarpa holds Liantiago, and it appears that Antiago belongs to Lord Bhayar. There's nothing left of the palace or any of the troopers and imagers who defended it." Quaeryt paused. "If there's nothing urgent … I'd like to see Vaelora."

"No, sir, there's nothing urgent."

Quaeryt glanced toward the ship. "Zhelan! You're in command for now. Have the men disembark and unload."

"Yes, sir."

"If you'd lead the way, Subcommander?"

Khaern turned, and Quaeryt stepped up beside him, almost losing his balance as the heel of the boot on his bad leg caught the edge of an upraised pier stone.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm fine." *The question is how Vaelora is.* "How many men did you lose?"

"Only about a hundred, sir."

"With all this?" Quaeryt gestured at the seemingly endless grayness of destruction. "How did you do it?"

"Ah … I didn't, sir. Without the Lady Vaelora…"

"Go on."

"It was a Jeudi, well before dawn. Lady Vaelora ran down the stairs at the River Inn and told me to get all the officers and men and mounts out of the town. She said that the Antiagons were coming and that nothing would be left of the town." Khaern shook his head. "I didn't believe her at first, but there were lights and shapes on the water … We'd gotten a battalion out when the first cannonballs struck the town. One way and another, we pulled back to north side of the wall, way back, almost to those rocky hills, while the cannonballs kept coming. Lady Vaelora-she directed the battalions where to go while I was getting the rest of them out of Kephria."

"Where is everyone?" asked Quaeryt. "There's nowhere to stay, and I don't see a camp."

"We've only got a company here, sir. That's because Lady Vaelora said we had to maintain a presence here. Most of Calkoran's men-"

"He's here?"

"They arrived a little more than two weeks after you left, and I and the rest of Eleventh Regiment came two days later, just before the

Antiagons attacked. Well … four days before they did, just long enough for that bastard Nykaal to claim he never saw them."

"He said that?"

"No, sir. We've never seen him or the other captain since they dropped us off. Didn't really see much of him, either, on the trip here, just his officers, especially the junior officers, ensigns, whatever they're called. Anyway, we've got battalions garrisoned in the smaller towns along the hills to the east, at least for now."

At the end of the pier, Khaern turned south and then followed a path through the rubble at the east end of the fort and inside the solid stone structure. In the middle of the south side of the fort was a low bed. A gray-haired woman saw Quaeryt and Khaern and eased away from the bed. Khaern stopped.

Quaeryt moved quickly toward Vaelora.

She offered a wan smile, and tired as it was, he could feel the relief that she could do that much. Still … regardless of what Khaern had said, Vaelora looked worn and tired, and there was a bruise on her left cheek, and a scabbed scar across her forehead just below the hairline that angled into her hair, which had been cut short, barely longer than a boy's. In places, that wavy hair was almost frizzy. *How close had she been to Antiagon Fire?*

Quaeryt's eyes took in her form, slender under the blankets … and he knew. He swallowed, and his eyes burned. "How … did it happen?"

"I got hit … with a tree. It was a branch. One of the Antiagon cannonballs came over the wall, the big wall. I was there … trying to tell the majors and Calkoran where to send the men so that the cannonballs wouldn't hit them. It didn't even hurt all that much…"

Then Quaeryt was on his knees beside the low bed, his arms around her.

"… but then it hurt so much … she was so pretty … even…" Great racking sobs convulsed Vaelora.

All Quaeryt could do was hold her.

In time, the sobs subsided, and she eased away from his shoulder. "I'm all right. We … we really can…"

There were more sobs, and Quaeryt's face was as damp as Vaelora's, even as he tried to reassure her. "It will be all right … do love you…"

In time, they gathered themselves together once more.

"How did you know the Antiagons were coming when they were?" Quaeryt asked.

"I didn't at first. I did, but I didn't. You remember that I told you I had a farsight vision that I thought was well in the future…"

"Yes…" ventured Quaeryt warily. "You wouldn't tell me."

"You know why. What you said about it might have colored what I recalled-and that would be dangerous. I didn't know what to make of it. It was just a vision of a harbor with burning buildings … and I didn't even recognize it … with the fire … and then I had another vision…" Tears began to stream down Vaelora's cheeks once more. "Someday … I'll tell you about it."

Quaeryt just held her once more.

After several moments she blotted her face and went on. "I woke up, and I looked out the inn window … and I saw a light out in the Gulf … and another one." She looked at Quaeryt. "I *knew* then. Khaern didn't want to believe me, but he saw the lights too, and we started to rouse the men and get them moving. He agreed that it was better to take precautions. He might have been humoring me. He insisted I go with the first company … The cannonballs came down first, near the water, and … we just did what we had to. I think hundreds of townspeople died. They didn't believe us, and by the time they did … some of them couldn't get away."

"But how did you escape the troopers?"

Vaelora shook her head. "They never came after us. They used cannon the first day. The second day, they used Antiagon Fire … Then they spent a day destroying Ephra before they came back and used the troopers to get the imagers far enough north along the river to burn down Geusyn. Once it was gone, they got back on the ships and left."

Trying to get back to Liantiago in case we were attacking? That was likely, but Quaeryt doubted that he'd ever know for certain. Nor did it matter … now.

"They're all dead," he said. "At least, we destroyed three warships and a ketch."

"What about Aliaro?" Vaelora's voice was cold.

"He's dead. Everyone in the palace and everyone in the Autarch's Square who was trying to defend the palace is dead. Skarpa holds Liantiago as acting regional governor."

"That was too good a death for him." Her voice caught. "I was going to name her Chaerila…"

For several moments Quaeryt could say nothing as he held her hands in his.

Then, abruptly, Vaelora cleared her throat and looked at Quaeryt. "Once I recover fully, dearest, I will need some new clothes. Most everything got burned up, and I was a little … occupied."

Quaeryt swallowed. *Clothes? How could she …* Then he almost shook his head, realizing that she was trying to divert him … and herself. He managed to offer a smile. "We should be able to manage that, after all you've been through."

"I didn't lose everything, though. Almost, but I did save this."

Vaelora held up a small leatherbound volume.

Somehow, *Rholan and the Nameless* didn't seem so terribly important as, still on his knees, he leaned forward and put his arms around her once more.